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by Charles Homans

MAY/JUNE 2010
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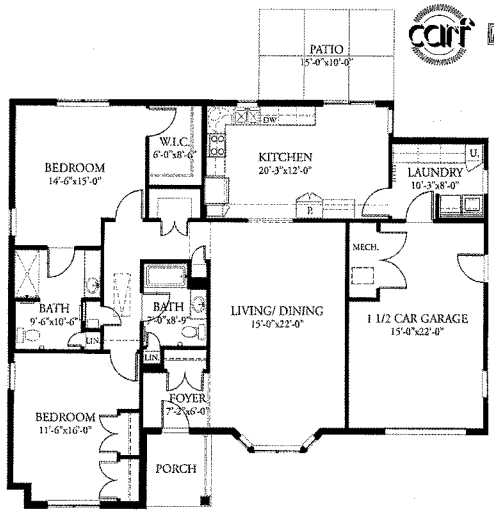

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Editor's Note

PAUL GLASTRIS

36 and 44

What a difference a vote makes. In January, Barack Obama was being likened to Jimmy Carter. Now, after the passage of health care reform, he's being compared to LBJ. The Carter link was tenuous at best, but the comparison to Lyndon Johnson is apt. When you add the health care bill—the last, great unfinished piece of the New Deal—to the massive stimulus package that helped avert another Great Depression, to a host of less-celebrated but still impressive measures (tripling the size of AmeriCorps, cracking down on credit card abuse, protecting women against pay discrimination, giving the FDA regulatory authority over tobacco), Obama has already racked up enough liberal legislative victories in his first year–plus to put himself within hailing distance of Johnson's domestic policy record. And he's done so with a significantly smaller congressional majority.

It's impossible, however, not to notice—as many have—a more troubling parallel: between Obama's decision to increase troops in Afghanistan and Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War. Much ink has been spilled over the years analyzing how Johnson got sucked into the conflict that would divide the country and destroy his presidency. But an especially shrewd read on what happened can be found in the pages of *Lyndon B. Johnson*, a new biography out in June by *Washington Monthly* founder Charlie Peters.

A Peace Corps official during the Kennedy-Johnson years, Peters was close to many in LBJ's and JFK's inner circles, so his book has the feel of lived experience. Peters also obtained enough fresh material, including an unpublished memoir by Johnson aide Jack Valenti, to shed new light on key moments of decision—in particular, a series of White House meetings in July of 1965 to consider the Pentagon's request for vastly more U.S. ground troops for "search and destroy" operations. At these fateful meetings, many of the most troubling questions were raised, often by the president himself. How long will the fighting go on? Is this a military solution to a political problem? What about the weakness and ineptitude of the South Vietnamese government? Can Westerners lacking good intelligence win a guerilla war in Asian jungles? Yet instead of demanding answers, Johnson ended the deliberations by agreeing to give the Pentagon nearly everything it asked for. Why? A belief in the "domino" theory, fear of political attack by hawkish opponents, but also, says Peters, a deep emotional need to be seen as courageous, one rooted in Johnson's Texas upbringing (he lied about having ancestors who died at the Alamo).

While Barack Obama seems blessedly free of such damaging insecurities, there's no denying that he faces in Afghanistan many of the same intractable problems—the corruption and incompetence of Hamid Karzai's government being the most obvious. Fortunately, Obama has an advantage Johnson lacked: he can study and try to avoid LBJ's failures in Vietnam.

The degree to which Obama has already done so is one of many revelations in a riveting book out in May, *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*, by another *Washington Monthly* alumnus, *Newsweek*'s Jonathan Alter. A narrative of the administration's first year, it is the kind of quick-turnaround book—"history on the fly," as Alter calls it—that is easier to write about campaigns than presidencies, unless you have very good sources, which Alter does (in part because of the Chicago roots and connections he shares with the president and some of his closest advisers). Alter reports that Obama and his national security team read Gordon Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster*, a book about the Johnson administration's failure to challenge the assumptions that led to the war's escalation. So when General Stanley McChrystal, the newly appointed commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, delivered a report last August calling for a major increase in troops and long-term commitment to nation building, Obama did what Johnson did not: he pushed back. After a famously protracted reassessment of the entire Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy, he agreed to an increase in forces but demanded a much tighter timeframe for their withdrawal (beginning in the summer of 2011) than the military wanted. And to make sure the small Afghan military could take responsibility of whatever U.S. ground forces might capture from the Taliban, he demanded that McChrystal narrow the scope of his counterinsurgency ambitions, telling the general point-blank, "Do not occupy what you cannot transfer."

Whether Obama's Afghanistan strategy will work is impossible to say. But if it does—and if he can extricate us from Iraq, too—he will not only match Johnson's record, but far exceed it. WM

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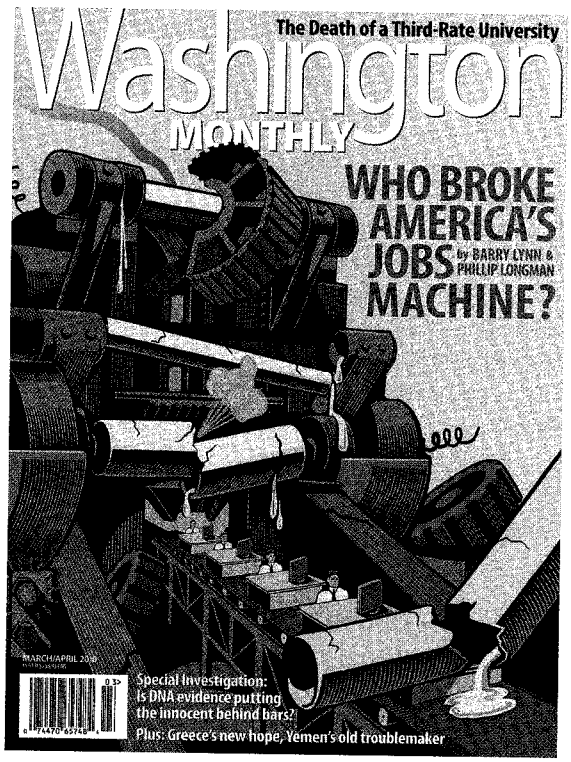

WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE ... AND TAKE THE AFTERNOON OFF

Barry C. Lynn and Phillip Longman give a good list of surface causes of market failure at job creation ["Who Broke America's Jobs Machine?" *Washington Monthly,* March/April 2010]. But there is a more fundamental process at work. Any economic system in which population and worker productivity are both increasing will develop a surplus labor problem—eventually there won't be enough full days' work to be had producing real goods and services.

The American ideals of inalienable rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and of the promotion of the general welfare, point toward solving this problem with national shared-work programs. The workday and/or workweek must be cut, as in France; mandatory vacation must be instituted and lengthened; and earlier retirement with better security must be enabled.

Robert Cogan
Via e-mail

TEXTBOOK FAILURE

I am appalled after reading Mariah Blake's "Revisionaries" [*Washington Monthly*, January/February 2010]. My wife and I were both educated in Texas public schools. We had a good grounding in American history as well as world history, science, mathematics, geography, and social studies, and were not in any way out of the loop when we went to college.

I do not know what has happened to public education in Texas, but the sad result of the conservative agenda will be a generation of people with deformed ideas and opinions. Sadder still is that these intellectual cripples will be citizens of an America whose power and influence in the world is marginalized exactly in proportion to their stunted and biased thinking.

Don Wall
Hurst, Texas

I read your story on the Texas Board of Education with a mixture of horror and disbelief. This and so many other things in our country point toward a second-rate status of the United States in the not-so-distant future. Even if history textbooks not fully based on expert knowledge are not able to be pushed past the Texas State Board of Education stranglehold and the spineless, money-grubbing attitudes of the book publishers, yours and similar articles will go a long way in informing the coming generations why this nation has declined.

Goran Satler
Via e-mail

MUSEUM ROW

Thanks for running a photo of the jacket of *Rogues' Gallery*, my history of the men and women behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with your recent article ["Met Expectations," by David Wallace-Wells, *Washington Monthly*, March/April 2010] on Calvin Tomkins's forty-year-old book on the institution. At least the visual was up-to-date. Let's do the time warp again!

Michael Gross
New York, NY

Editor's note:
*The story "DNA's Dirty Little Secret" [*Washington Monthly, *March/April 2010] gave insufficient credit to the* Los Angeles Times, *which in 2008 published a groundbreaking investigation of the John Puckett case and of the misuse of DNA evidence in cold-hit cases, and to an article on the same subject in* San Francisco *magazine. Also, passages in the* Washington Monthly *story shared unacceptable similarities with passages in both the* L.A. Times *and the* San Francisco *articles. The passages were added during the editing of the story. We deeply regret these errors and have made changes to the Web version of the story to correct them.*

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TILTING *at windmills*

By Charles Peters

Me the people

"The system is broken." This lament is heard constantly these days. But it's the same system we've always had. Resistant to change, to be sure, but, as the New Deal and the Great Society proved, capable of major reform.

What's wrong now is us, as Evan Thomas points out in a recent *Newsweek* article with the very apt title "We the Problem." In my own view, a culture of selfishness gradually developed out of the many good changes of the 1960s. An assertion of justified rights morphed into a sense of group entitlement, soon to be the sense of personal entitlement reflected in the Me Generation of the 1970s and the explosion of greed that followed in the 1980s. Too many people are concerned only with getting theirs, without regard to the other folks. It must be said, however, that the political organization that appeals most strongly to our selfishness is the Republican Party. Its abuse of the sixty-vote requirement for stopping filibusters has become a major obstacle to change, as has its propensity for saying no to any reform that does not involve trial lawyers.

The real reds

It is ironic that the Republicans, who are trying to label the Democrats as socialist, have themselves been imitating the communists. Recall Lenin's strategy to make Kerensky look bad: don't cooperate on anything so he will fail and we can take over.

Reconcile this

Remember how Mitch McConnell said that reconciliation had "never been used for ... major systemic reform," Orrin Hatch called it the "nuclear option," and Charles Grassley said that "it was never contemplated for this kind of legislation," meaning the health care bill? Much of the media bought this Republican propaganda. I recall Wolf Blitzer saying reconciliation was not used for "major legislation." Then came *Slate*'s Timothy Noah, who pointed out that the most momentous piece of social legislation in the last twenty years, the welfare reform bill, was entitled the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and was supported by McConnell, Hatch, and Grassley.

> Obama stands alone among Democratic presidents in having the courage to take on the teacher's unions.

After Noah's piece, we learned that at least fifteen major pieces of legislation since 1981 were passed using reconciliation, making Obama's health care bill the sixteenth, not the first as the Republicans contended.

C.O.A.

When *Vanity Fair*'s Michael Lewis asked why Oliver Stone and Michael Douglas were making another movie about Wall Street, they told him that their original message did not get across. Douglas explains, citing a typical reaction from people from the world of finance: "Man, I want to tell you, you are the single biggest reason I got into the business. I watched *Wall Street*, and I wanted to be Gordon Gekko." In other words, the people who have been coming to Wall Street in recent years are not corruptible, as was the ambitious airline mechanic's son played by Charlie Sheen in that movie, but already corrupt on arrival.

Filtering out the facts

The attacks on Obama for not being clear about his message grew to a point where they became the conventional wisdom. Yet I noticed that even when what Obama was saying could not be more clear, as in his recent criticism of insurance companies, the media filter made it almost impossible for his message to reach the public. Journalists are so eager to give us their take or to solicit the opinion of "Democratic and Republican strategists" that Obama's actual words tend to get short shrift. Consider, for example, the *Washington Post*'s lead story on March 9 about Obama's speech the previous day at Arcadia University. The second paragraph contains one sentence of the speech. Twenty paragraphs later, the speech is quoted again. And those are the only times Obama gets through the maze of analysis and opinion about his tactics and strategy.

This magazine has been a pioneer in injecting analysis and opinion into facts-

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only journalism. But we have tried to include enough of these elements to explain what we think the facts mean, not to relegate them to the role of bit players in the story.

A different kind of chicken

When Timothy Geithner had finished telling the *Atlantic*'s Joshua Green that he warned the financial community of the dangers of derivatives long before the collapse, Green asked him why he had not warned the public. Geithner answered, "I don't believe in the Chicken Little stuff ... It wasn't my place, and I tried to focus on changing the things that I could affect." Does Geithner really think that a clear warning to the public from the head of the New York Fed, Geithner's job at the time, would have had no impact? As secretary of the treasury will he still feel it's not his place to warn us should another fiscal disaster threaten?

Un-stimulated

As an illustration of Obama's lack of sophistication about the executive branch of the federal government, I cite the slowness in implementing the stimulus bill.

In our March/April issue last year, I warned the White House that it was entrusting far too much stimulus money to the Energy Department, which I said was notorious for its inability to spend money quickly and effectively. On February 5 of this year, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, "Energy Secretary Steven Chu expressed frustration Thursday that *most* of the roughly $37 billion in stimulus money Congress gave his agency last year had yet to be spent." (Italics mine.)

Skin in the game

I wonder if you will be as shocked as I am to learn that currency traders—the people who speculate on whether the dollar or the yen or the euro will go up or down—have to put up only $1,000 in order to trade $100,000 in currency. I made this discovery reading a back-section article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Foes take on debt curbs from CFTC." It reports that the Commodity Futures Trading Commission has proposed to cut the hundred-to-one limit to ten to one, and even that limit would not apply to banks and securities brokers, which fall outside the CFTC's jurisdiction.

I wonder if you will be as shocked as I am to learn that currency traders—the people who speculate on whether the dollar or the yen or the euro will go up or down—have to put up only $1,000 in order to trade $100,000 in currency.

It is frightening to realize that the power of the speculators is such that they can resist even the most modest reform with hope of success. The argument they and their supporters use, as summed up by the *Journal*, is that "investors could be even less protected if trading moves to a country with lax rules." My own solution is that they just stop speculating and get into more constructive lines of work.

Emanuel can't

Rahm Emanuel should ponder the fate of the recently departed Desirée Rogers. "A social secretary's job is to help the first family put their own social mark on the White House," Nancy Reagan's press secretary, Sheila Tate, tells the *Daily Beast*'s Sandra McElwaine. "If it becomes about [her], then there's a problem." The same rule applies to the chief of staff. He can't let the story be about him.

When a White House is perceived as failing, as Obama's was this winter, it is tempting for a member of the staff to try, either directly or through his friends, to let the world know that he is not responsible for the failure. Thus it was that, as this White House was in its greatest peril after the Democratic defeat in Massachusetts, there suddenly appeared four major stories picturing Emanuel as largely right and the president as largely wrong. I believe Jonathan Alter, author of *The Promise*, when he assures me that Emanuel would never intentionally hurt Obama—but that is exactly what these stories did. And I believe the *Post*'s Dana Milbank when he says Emanuel was not a source for the first article, but I am confident Emanuel's friends were sources.

When the story continued in three more articles, you had to realize that Emanuel was either involved or had not cautioned his friends to hold their tongues because they were hurting the president. Noam Scheiber's piece in the *New Republic* specifically notes that Emanuel "refused to speak to me on the record," leaving a mile-wide hole, which Emanuel could have filled by providing guidance and background on a "not-for-attribution" basis. It seems unlikely that all this has gone unnoticed by his colleagues at the White House. My best guess is that Emanuel will be gone by the end of the year. A likely replacement, I'm told, is Phil Schiliro, whom insiders credit with doing the heaviest lifting in the final passage of health care.

Will Roberts reconsider?

Murray Hill's is my favorite political candidacy of the year. What makes it so is that Murray is a corporation running for Congress from Maryland. Its candidacy instantly reveals the absurdity of the Supreme Court's decision that voided restrictions on campaign contributions by corporations on the ground that corporations have the same rights as people.

Afghaniscam

In Afghanistan, we're counting on two conditions to permit us to withdraw: an effective Afghan security force and an effective government. As to the first, reports from C. J. Chivers of the *New York Times* and Atia Abawi of CNN are not reassuring. Chivers concludes that "the day when the Afghan Army will be able to perform complex operations independently ... remains far off." Abawi has reached a similar conclusion, noting that we have concentrated more on the "quantity" of Afghan troops than the "quality."

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As for the Afghan government, it's hard to believe that we're changing the culture of corruption that dominates public affairs in Afghanistan. After learning from the *New York Times* that the crooked brother of Hamid Karzai is on the CIA payroll, and reading the numerous accounts of the corruption of Afghan police, we learn from the *Washington Post* that the U.S. Army is working with Colonel Abdul Razziq, a prominent Afghan police official, who is accused of stuffing ballot boxes for Karzai and is viewed by some U.S. officials as "a notorious criminal whose behavior corrodes the credibility of Afghan authorities." To top it all off comes a report from the *Post* that Karzai "has taken control of a formerly independent body that monitors election fraud," freeing himself to steal future elections without fear of exposure.

The weeping of the Uighurs

Have you read about those Chinese Muslims at Guantanamo? It seems that the U.S. government now admits that the Muslims, known as Uighurs, have been unjustly imprisoned for eight years, but the government opposes their request to be released in the United States, and the Supreme Court has just refused to consider their appeal. If, as it appears, we have done a terrible wrong to these people—and eight years at Guantanamo strikes me as a terrible wrong indeed—why aren't we obligated to admit them to the United States as the very least we can do to atone?

But I hear it has really nice cupholders ...

The fighter plane the Defense Department is now buying is the F-35. It is priced at at least three times the cost of one of the planes it is supposed to replace, the F-16, and six times the cost of the other, the A-10. According to a reliable Pentagon spending critic, Winslow Wheeler, the F-35 cannot perform some of the functions of the planes it is replacing. The A-10, for example, supplies low-altitude support for ground troops, while the F-35 will have to provide that support from an altitude of at least 20,000 feet.

The F-35 is another example of our tendency to devote too much of our national security budget to high-ticket items. By contrast, the entire Coast Guard will receive less money in 2011 than the Pentagon will pay for one F-35 alone. And the poor Coast Guard is in peril of fiscal starvation. According to an op-ed in the *New York Times* by Lawrence J. Korb and Sean E. Duggan, twelve of the nineteen cutters sent to help Haiti had "severe problems at sea," because their average age is forty-one years compared to fourteen for the average Navy ship.

Dead men's money

One of the great triumphs of the Republican Party has been its success at demonizing the estate tax as the "death tax." This has enabled them to cut it back dramatically. Until January, the tax only applied to estates over $3.5 million, and this year it has been eliminated entirely. To understand just how successful the Republicans have been, consider the fact that as late as the early 1970s, estates over $200,000 were taxed.

In 2011, the tax will be reinstituted on estates over $1 million, which strikes me as a reasonable figure. But you can be certain there will be a major Republican move to kill the tax again, even when the country desperately needs revenue.

> The entire Coast Guard is scheduled to receive less money in the 2011 budget than the Pentagon will pay for one F-35 fighter jet.

The ignored threat

When that private pilot crashed his plane into the IRS building in Austin, Texas, the first comments on television questioned the safety of private aviation and its potential for use by terrorists. And I thought to myself, "Finally this subject will get the attention it deserves." Within a few hours, however, the pilot's grievances against the IRS became the story, to the total exclusion of safety and terrorism. The reason this was so disturbing was that the *Washington Post's* Spencer S. Hsu had just reported that the Transportation Safety Administration is "preparing to scale back a ... plan to expand aviation security rules for the first time to thousands of private planes." As we have frequently pointed out, there is nothing to prevent pilots from using private planes, some of which are large jets, to carry out suicide attacks. And as the Texas incident made clear, even small planes can inflict horrendous damage.

Goldman and the Greeks

Goldman Sachs is in the news again, and for the same kind of double dealing noted in our last issue. This time it's in trouble for helping Greece hide its escalating debt and then helping to create an index that enabled speculators to bet that Greece would default. I can't help wondering how much longer Warren Buffett, a man I admire in so many ways, can justify his large stake in Goldman when its behavior so often has skirted far too close to ethical boundaries.

Insufficient postage

The U.S. Postal Service is another agency with terrible money problems. It desperately needs to cut expenses. Reducing mail delivery to five days a week seems a perfectly reasonable solution to its problem, yet it is opposed by many congressmen. They are being totally irresponsible, demanding six days of delivery but asking the postal service to somehow magically pay its own way.

Lax at LAX

General aviation—that's the fancy term for the world of private planes—is not the only example of indulgent regulation by the Federal Aviation Administration. Maintenance of the planes flown by the regular airlines is another. "During the past six years, millions of passengers have been on at least 65,000 U.S. airline flights that shouldn't have taken off because planes weren't properly maintained," reports Gary Stoller of *USA Today*. After a six-month investigation, he found that FAA records showed that "substandard repairs, unqual-

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ified mechanics and lax oversight by airlines and the FAA are not unusual."

One example is the American Airlines jet that had an engine catch fire on takeoff on September 28, 2007, because of a series of maintenance mistakes by mechanics. Lives can be lost: a mechanic working on a Continental jet was sucked into an engine because the crew did not have the right information about how to handle the maintenance issues at hand; eighty-eight passengers were killed on an Alaska Airlines plane that crashed because a part on its tail was not lubricated properly.

LBJ redux

Getting student loan reform passed as part of health bill reconciliation was a maneuver worthy of Lyndon Johnson at his wiliest. Obama, Pelosi, Reid, and the reform's sponsor Rep. George Miller deserve great credit for not giving the banks and Sallie Mae time to muster all their potent artillery to protect the wasteful and unnecessary federal subsidies they have been receiving. Unfortunately, this major accomplishment has gone largely unheralded by the media.

> The people who have been coming to Wall Street in recent years are not corruptible, as was the ambitious airline mechanic's son played by Charlie Sheen in *Wall Street*, but already corrupt on arrival.

Pension, what pension?

The *Charleston Gazette* reports that West Virginia needs $145 million this year to "shore up" its pension fund. Public employee pension shortfalls are not confined to West Virginia. The Pew Center for the States reports there is a $1 trillion difference between what all fifty states have promised retiring public employees and what the states have put aside to cover the cost. One of the most flagrant examples is Illinois, where the gap is more than $50 billion.

An overdue goodwill gesture

India and Pakistan have agreed to talk over their differences, and the West Bank Palestinians have agreed to talks with Israel. These are hopeful signs. Now if the United States would only lean on India to be fair about Kashmir and Israel to freeze its settlements, the results could be wondrous, not only for our relations with the Pakistanis and the Palestinians but with the entire Muslim world. It would also be a major step toward reducing the number of potential recruits for terrorist organizations. It is just possible that the recent Israeli insult to Vice President Joe Biden will finally inspire the United States to get tough with Israel. Since this is an election year, however, don't hold your breath.

The truth about Tyler

If you pay any attention to the history of World War II, you probably know about the young lieutenant who ignored the radar warning that could've alerted commanders that Japanese planes were on their way to Pearl Harbor. His name is Kermit Tyler and he is usually depicted as a hapless incompetent. But in an obituary of Tyler, who died recently, I found some strikingly exculpatory evidence. He "was never trained for that job," David Martinez, the chief Pearl Harbor historian at the National Park Service, tells the *Washington Post*. "He had a walk-through the previous Wednesday but had never spent a full day there."

Furthermore, the radar operators neglected to tell Lieutenant Tyler that the blips on their radar showed fifty planes and that they were not the much smaller number of B-17s Tyler knew were scheduled to fly into Hawaii that morning—and so he assumed that was what the radar operators saw.

Tenure by rubber stamp

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the local school system "routinely grants tenure to new teachers after cursory reviews—and sometimes none at all." The system's "evaluation of teachers does not take into account whether students are learning." The result is that "[f]ewer than 2% are denied tenure." Of course, this problem is not confined to Los Angeles. "In most states, after two or three years, teachers are given lifetime tenure," reports *Newsweek*, describing the situation nationwide. The magazine concludes, "In no other socially significant profession are the workers so insulated from accountability." This may seem a stretch—after all, bar associations tend to be quite tolerant of dubious ethics and competence. But most clients can make their own judgments of quality and take their business elsewhere if they think their lawyer is not good enough. Public school students and parents usually have to accept the teachers they get, so *Newsweek* is right.

Law and disorder

I've actually found an example of a lawyer being held accountable by the law. Of course, this West Virginia attorney had to go pretty far to get his misbehavior noticed. He's been indicted for stealing more than $1,000 from a client and then beating the client with a baseball bat when the client complained.

Barack the brave

Speaking of justice for Obama, he has not been given nearly enough credit for his stand on education reform. By advocating the dismissal of underperforming teachers, he and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, have incurred the anger of the teacher's unions, something no other Democratic president has risked doing. Jimmy Carter was in the pocket of the NEA, and Bill and Hillary Clinton, after being burned by trying to reform public schools in Arkansas—teachers rioted outside the governor's mansion—did not touch that third rail of liberal politics again. WM

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Partisan Hacks

Conservatives have discovered the virtues of investigative journalism. But can their reporting survive their politics?

By Laura McGann

In early 2008, the Nevada Policy Research Institute, a Las Vegas–based libertarian think tank, decided to take a hard look at the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, a public/private organization with an annual budget of about $200 million, which NPRI suspected was wasting taxpayer money. In the past, the institute had produced white papers on state spending abuses, but these efforts had barely registered on the public's radar. So it decided to try a different approach: hiring a respected investigative journalist and *New York Times* contributor named John Dougherty to dig up dirt on the agency.

Dougherty dove into the project, spending eight months filing open-records requests, slogging through reams of documents and doing the sort of grueling legwork that most newspapers can no longer afford. And the institute paid him handsomely to do it—his contract would've worked out to $80,000 a year—even if it wouldn't disclose who exactly was signing the checks. In the end, Dougherty produced a damning report, which concluded the authority was engaged in "a pattern of extravagant spending, lax accounting, shoddy oversight and a disturbingly cozy relationship with major contractors." The findings caused a stir in the local media, and eventually prompted the convention authority to keep a tighter rein on the spending practices of its contractors. By all accounts, the project was a success.

Courtesy of YouTube

A few months later, Dougherty's bosses asked him to start joining in on conference calls with reporters from other similar free-market policy groups across the country. The calls were organized by a new nonprofit called the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, which was training right-of-

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center think tanks to do investigative journalism, as well as funding nonprofits to run news sites and hire reporters—including Dougherty, who says his contract was now being paid for with Franklin Center money. The calls rubbed Dougherty the wrong way. "What bothered me," he recalls, "was they were taking delight in causing specific angst for political gain. It wasn't, to me, 'This is public interest journalism.' This is hatchet journalism to attack an opposing candidate." After Dougherty wrote a memo to his bosses explaining his discomfort, they allowed him to skip the teleconferences, and he went on to write more than a dozen stories questioning the legality of the state's property tax structure. Once again, Dougherty's reporting hit a nerve; at least two of the state's Republican gubernatorial candidates have made overhauling the property tax system part of their campaign platforms.

Then, this past March, NPRI and Dougherty started talking about yet another project: forming a nonprofit investigative reporting center in Nevada. Dougherty was intrigued, but only wanted to be involved if the center's board was independent and included a mix of political perspectives. NPRI refused to agree to these terms. Weary of the secrecy and ax grinding surrounding the whole endeavor, Dougherty finally cut ties with the group.

historically, muckraking journalism has been the domain of the mainstream press and left-leaning magazines like the *Nation* and *Mother Jones*. Conservative media, on the other hand, have stuck mostly to the model crafted by *National Review* founder William F. Buckley and poured their energy into punditry—long on fiery rhetoric, short on scoops. When Fox News commentator Tucker Carlson told an audience at last year's Conservative Political Action Conference that conservative publications should aspire to create right-leaning equivalents of the *New York Times* and "put accuracy first," he was booed by the crowd.

But with Democrats back in power and the fourth estate in shambles, conservatives are starting to discover the virtues of shoe-leather reporting, and are throwing their organizational savvy and financial clout behind sustained investigative ventures. The Franklin Center, which is run by a Republican political consultant with no journalism background, supports ten state-level investigative news sites under the moniker Watchdog.org. Meanwhile, free-market state-based think tanks have begun hiring reporters to work in-house, focusing on local and state spending—in the last six months alone, they have brought at least eighteen reporters on board.

Playing dress-up: James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles's infamous—and, it turned out, disingenuously edited—video of their sting operation targeting the community organization ACORN.

"There has always been, to some degree, a sort of tension between my point of view about reporting and his," Steven Miller, the institute's vice president for policy and Dougherty's former supervisor, said when I asked him about the incident. "It's amazing we found as much common ground as we did."

Though he didn't realize it at the time, Dougherty had stumbled onto the frontlines of a burgeoning movement. His-

More established conservative brands have also jumped into the fray. Last year, the *Washington Times* launched *America's Morning News*, a syndicated radio show that features reports on government waste and malfeasance from nearly a dozen investigative reporters (the Web site touts the operation as "the largest group of investigative journalists ever assembled for a nationally syndicated radio program"). Carlson's new on-

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line media venture, the Daily Caller, debuted in January with twenty-one reporters and editors and won over even many liberal skeptics two months later when it broke a major story about the Republican National Committee's profligate spending habits, including a nearly $2,000 tab at a Los Angeles bondage-themed strip club.

For people who care about holding politicians to account, these are promising developments. At a time when most media outlets are slashing budgets and gutting their investigative units, an army of spending-obsessed conservative sleuths could be just what we need to help keep government honest—especially on the state level, where some of the most appalling government waste and malfeasance happens and where, thanks to the demise of newspapers, deep reporting is most endangered.

The question is whether these new investigative ventures will be able to steer clear of the ideological stumbling blocks that have tripped up conservative muckrakers in the past. The handful of conservatives who have ventured into investigative journalism have tended to mix reporting with partisan activism, and their high-profile scores have sometimes been spoiled by their zealous pursuit of political victories. In the 1990s, for instance, the conservative *American Spectator* magazine, after publishing David Brock's "Troopergate" expose on Bill Clinton's alleged extramarital affairs, went on to spend nearly $2 million of philanthropist Richard Mellon Scaife's money trying to dig up more dirt on Clinton. But the so-called "Arkansas Project" produced only crackpot accusations—not to mention enough embarrassing revelations about how the funds were spent to nearly sink the publication. Last year, two young conservative activists, James O'Keefe and Hannah Giles, working with online right-wing media mogul Andrew Breitbart's Big Government Web site, made headlines with a sting operation on the conservative bête noire ACORN, posing as a pimp and a prostitute asking for tax evasion advice. But much of the damning material they got on video proved to be the work of creative editing, and in January O'Keefe was arrested for allegedly trying to bug phones in Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu's office as part of a similar journalistic stunt.

Just because a reporter's work is driven by ideology does not necessarily mean his findings are any less valid. But when the drive to score partisan points swamps normal journalistic considerations, like accuracy and ethics, it can lead to cherry picking, distortion, or worse.

Like these efforts, the new breed of conservative investigative journalism is driven by an activist impulse. For most, the primary aim is to package their agenda in a way that makes the public and the media more likely to latch on. "Our ultimate goal is to get stuff out and limit the growth of taxes," says Steve Lonegan, the state director for the New Jersey chapter of Americans for Prosperity, which was advertising an opening for an investigative reporter in February. "However we do that is fine. We're not a newspaper."

Strategically, this makes perfect sense. A think tank can turn out heaps of research reports, and most of them will be ignored by the press. But something that looks like reporting, and contains actual news, will get picked up in a hurry, and the ideological leanings of its source will often go unexamined. Of course, just because a reporter's work is driven by ideology does not necessarily mean his findings are any less valid. The dirt Dougherty dug up on the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority was clearly a valuable public service, regardless of who commissioned it. But when the drive to score partisan points swamps normal journalistic considerations, like accuracy and ethics, it can lead to cherry picking, distortion, or worse.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the promise and peril of the new breed of conservative muckraking is the Franklin Center and its Watchdog network. Run by small staffs (some have only one reporter) that include both veteran newspaper journalists and political activists, the sites publish short items on a more or less daily basis, with a mostly monolithic set of interests; the Kansas Watchdog is typical in proclaiming its intentions to root out "government waste and inefficiency, political corruption and anything that goes against free-market principles." From time to time, these outlets run hard-hitting stories on worthy topics that are overlooked by the mainstream press. In January, for instance, Texas Watchdog deputy editor Jennifer Peebles, working with the nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity, produced a piece detailing how serial rapists on college campuses often go unpunished. More recently, the national Watchdog site (in collaboration with Delaware's like-minded Caesar Rodney Institute) ran a story by Lee Williams, a former investigative reporter for the *News Journal* in Wilmington, who spent nine months probing the Delaware Department of Insurance's Captive Insurance Bureau and found it was rife with cronyism and waste. Among other things, Williams discovered that the agency paid the bureau's director nearly $200,000 a year, even though he lived in another state, held another full-time job, and rarely set foot inside the agency's office.

In at least one case, the Watchdogs have also broken a major national news story. Last November, the New Mexico site reported that millions of stimulus dollars allocated to the state were disappearing into nonexistent congressional districts, a fact editor Jim Scarantino unearthed by poring over data on Recovery.gov, the federal government's stimulus-tracking Web site. The national Watchdog site followed Scarantino's lead, reporting that nationwide more than $6.4 billion

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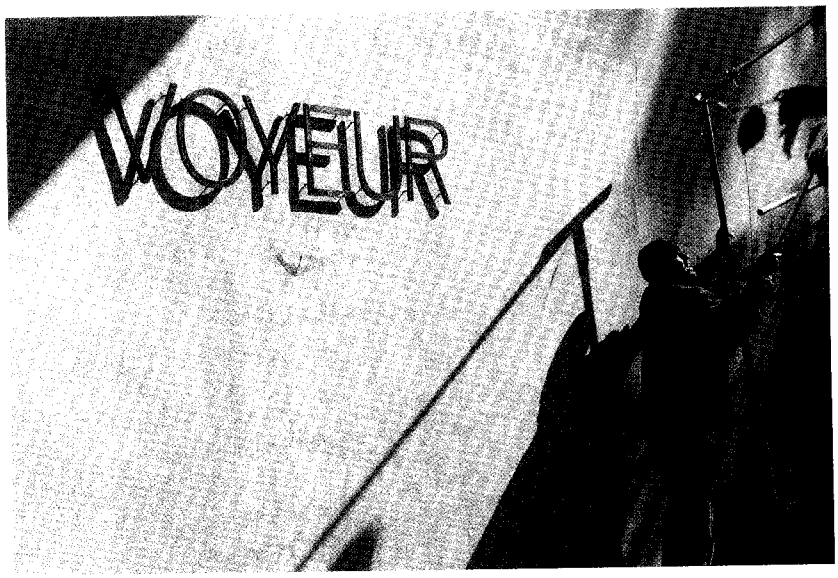
was going to such "phantom congressional districts." The story spread from conservative blogs to regional newspapers, and eventually TV news; ABC claimed the scoop was a network "exclusive." By the first week in December, the story had gotten so big that it inspired a satirical segment on the *Colbert Report*. At a moment when local newspapers across the country were cutting newsroom budgets or folding altogether, the story offered a flicker of hope: perhaps even a small, online-only news operation could hold the federal government accountable.

The only problem: the story was, at best, misleading. In a "fact check" feature on Watchdog's scoop, the Associated Press's Matt Apuzzo took the step that the Watchdog reporters had not: he checked to see what was happening to the money. As it turns out, the funds were going exactly where they were supposed to go, not vanishing into black holes as the Watchdog sites had implied. The problem was simply that a handful of the local government agencies and nonprofits that had received stimulus funds had mistyped the zip codes when they entered information about their projects into the federal database. In other words, all the fuss had been over a few stray typos. "[T]he 'phantom congressional districts' are being used as a phantom issue to suggest that stimulus money has been misspent," Apuzzo concluded.



Friendly fire: The Daily Caller, an online media start-up launched by conservative pundit Tucker Carlson in January, made a splash this spring with a scoop revealing that the Republican National Committee had blown nearly $2,000 at the racy Los Angeles nightclub Voyeur.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The zip codes scoop was not atypical for the Watchdog sites; as often as not, their reporting is thin and missing important context, which occasionally leads to gross distortions. The Nebraska Watchdog, for instance, recently ran a post claiming that a $2.5 million stimulus project to replace the roof of an Omaha courthouse would create only one job, which sounds on its face like an outrageous abuse of funds. But had the reporter dug a little deeper, the story would have lost most of its punch. Calls to the Government Services Agency, which oversees the distribution of stimulus funds, and Johnson Roofing, the company that did the work, reveal that while only one position was added specifically for the project, the number it employed was considerably larger. In fact, between eight and fifteen people worked on the project full-time for the five-month duration, and a dozen individual subcontractors were brought in on an ad hoc basis, according to Johnson's management. This sort of misleading reporting crops up on Watchdog sites often enough to suggest that, rather than isolated instances of sloppiness, it is part of a broad editorial strategy.

Then there's the secretive nature of the organization. Franklin hosts strategy calls, and an e-mail listserv for conservative reporting organizations, and hosts investigative journalism training sessions for reporters at free-market think tanks and Web sites—at least fifty of them have been invited to attend a training session in June, according to an internal e-mail—but instructs participants not to discuss the event with outsiders. For a little over a year, the group has also been giving grants to state-based conservative think tanks with a free-market bent to hire in-house reporters. But don't bother asking who's getting the money. Jason Stverak, the former political operative who runs Franklin, won't disclose anything about the independent projects his organization is bankrolling (though he'll have to on his 2009 tax returns). Nor will the directors of the state-based groups that have brought journalists on board say where they got the money to do so.

The Franklin Center and the Sam Adams Alliance, the free-market group that gave Franklin its initial start-up money, are also mum about where their funding comes from—which is more than a little ironic given Franklin's obsession with transparency in government. When I asked Stverak to explain the reasons for the secrecy, he argued that how the money flowed was irrelevant since Franklin's credibility hangs on the quality of the journalism it produces, not its funding sources. "We are trusted sources of real information," he maintained. "Fox News, ABC, CBS, CNN—these guys wouldn't wager their reputation on content they didn't find credible."

But in reality, Stverak appears to be banking on exactly the opposite being true—that in the age of a twenty-four-hour news cycle, cash-strapped news outlets will eagerly latch on to the scoops his team delivers and won't spend too much time questioning the underlying reporting or the bona fides of his organization, which looks more like a political attack machine than a traditional news operation. That kind of ideologically motivated, willfully misleading muckraking may be a well-worn strategy among partisan operatives. But it isn't journalism. WM

Laura McGann is an assistant editor at the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University and former editor of the nonprofit news site the Washington Independent.

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Late registration: David Stark, a laid-off auto parts assembly plant worker, retrains as a computer technician at the Tennessee Technology Center campus in Hohenwald, Tennessee.

Courtesy of Tennessee Technology Centers

Degrees of Speed

Millions of unemployed Americans need to upgrade their skills, fast. Community colleges aren't up to the task, but with help from Washington, they could be.

By Jamie P. Merisotis and Stan Jones

Last year, at the height of the recession, America's unemployment rate hit 10.2 percent, slightly lower than the 10.8 percent peak of the previous major recession in the early 1980s. But the recent crisis is likely to prove far more unforgiving for the nearly 15 million Americans who are still out of work. After the economy began to turn around in late 1982, a substantial portion of the unemployed returned to their old jobs, or at least to jobs in their previous occupations. That's less likely to happen this time around. The reason is that in recent years companies have learned to use economic slumps as opportunities to restructure—to close less-efficient facilities, drop less-profitable product lines, or extract themselves altogether from businesses that aren't making money. What that means is that those who have become unemployed in this recession haven't just lost their jobs; they've likely lost their careers. The skills that once earned them a living—assembling automobiles, processing mortgages, writing newspaper stories—are no longer much in demand in the marketplace. If these Americans hope to work again at anything approaching a middle-class wage, they'll need to acquire new skills.

A lot of them are trying. We've seen a surge in enrollment at community colleges and for-profit colleges and trade schools since 2008, as unemployed adults and recent high school graduates unable to find work go back to school. In general, this is a good thing. As the current recovery picks up steam, new jobs will be created—slowly, perhaps, but surely—and economists already have a reasonably good fix on what those jobs will be and the skill levels they'll require. Looking at federal government and other data, Anthony

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Carnevale and Jeff Strohl of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce forecast that about 47 million jobs will become available over the next decade, as workers in existing jobs retire and as newly created jobs come on line. About 30 million of these new positions will require a postsecondary education. Of those, 14 million will demand only a two-year associate's degree, a one-year certificate, or some college training short of a bachelor's degree. These "middle skill" occupations include jobs in information technology (network managers), business services (managing temp workers, running institutional food operations), and especially health care (nurses, nurse assistants, medical technicians). Starting salaries range from about $25,000 to more than $40,000 and can grow substantially from there. In fact, about 30 percent of people with one- and two-year college credentials earn more than people with bachelor's degrees.

For a substantial portion of today's unemployed, then, one- and two-year college credentials offer a viable route back to the American dream. There are a lot of obstacles, however, standing between a jobless adult and a college degree. Even the cheapest college education costs money, something most unemployed people—living on savings or credit cards—don't have a lot of. And the existing institutions that offer one- and two-year diplomas, primarily community colleges and for-profit schools, sometimes make the task of actually getting one far harder than it needs to be. Fortunately, there is a model college program already up and running in Tennessee that combines the best qualities of for-profit and community colleges to make it much easier for the unemployed to earn the credentials they need. And with an investment of federal money, much of which is already in the budget, that model could be spread nationwide. Politicians and the public agree that Washington should be focusing its energies on the unemployment crisis. Giving those who have lost their jobs better options to upgrade their skills is something Washington can actually do, and quickly, without breaking the federal bank.

Community colleges have been getting a great deal of attention lately, especially from the Obama administration, and for understandable reasons. At a time of soaring higher education costs, community colleges (average annual tuition: $2,361) are a relatively inexpensive means of providing large numbers of Americans with the higher skills they and the economy need. Community colleges are open to everybody and have done a wonderful job helping many Americans of humble backgrounds (including Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, actor-director Clint Eastwood, Costco CEO Jim Sinegal, and newscaster Jim Lehrer) get an education. They also serve a diverse population. If you are a retiree interested in taking a creative-writing class, an immigrant wanting to improve your English, or a recent high school graduate looking to garner college credits inexpensively before transferring to a four-year institution, community college is the place for you.

If you're out of work, however, it may not be, for a simple but vexing reason: time. The unemployed need to earn a degree quickly, so they can get back into the workforce. But speed is not the defining quality of most higher education institutions, including community colleges. It takes the average community college student five years to complete a two-year associate's degree, and four years to earn a one-year certificate.

Why the molasses-like pace? Part of the reason is that many students—especially recent high school graduates but also a fair number of adults—begin community college with such academic skill deficits that they have to take remedial classes before beginning their college-level coursework. A bigger reason, however, is that most colleges and universities, community colleges included, see themselves as academic institutions first and workforce-training centers second, and they structure their curricula accordingly. Even community college students headed for job-oriented degrees—in, say, landscape technology—must pass an array of general education courses in math, English, science, and the humanities. These courses are vitally important in providing students, especially recent high school graduates, with the critical thinking and communication skills they'll need to succeed in today's demanding economy. But they don't necessarily make sense for the many recently unemployed adults who have already developed such skills during their years in the workplace. Community colleges also typically schedule their courses at the sort of times—Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:40 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.; Wednesdays from 6 to 10 p.m.—that make it extremely difficult to amass the right credits in the right sequence to graduate on time—especially if you're unemployed and have children or other adult responsibilities.

In recent years companies have learned to use economic slumps as opportunities to restructure—to close less-efficient facilities, or drop less-profitable product lines. This means that those who have become unemployed in this recession haven't just lost their jobs; they've likely lost their careers.

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The longer it takes to get a degree, the fewer people get one, notes education and training consultant Brian Bosworth, because students lose heart and "life intervenes." Not surprisingly, completion rates are even lower in community colleges than they are in four-year colleges. Nationwide, only 23 percent of full-time community college students graduate in three years or less. Community colleges point out, rightly, that this figure doesn't fully reflect their success rates; if you measure over six years and count students who transfer to and later graduate from four-year schools without receiving a community college degree, then community college graduation rates are closer to 40 percent. That's a more impressive figure, to be sure, but still not stellar.

Those who do manage to earn one- or two-year degrees are usually in a much better position to get a job—but how *much* better is hard to say, because few states require community colleges to track the career paths of their graduates, even though the data are available. Nor do community colleges do much to help their graduates find employment. "At community colleges you don't generally have people whose job it is to place students," says Davis Jenkins of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College.

The nation has invested hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars in banks, automobile manufacturers, and other large corporations. Why can't we invest a fraction of those sums directly in the future of the workers who are the backbone of our economy?

With odds like these, it's natural that many unemployed people turn to for-profit schools like ITT Technical Institute, Bryant & Stratton College, or the University of Phoenix. These institutions heavily market their ability to do what community colleges don't: help students get degrees quickly and place them in good jobs. And they are better organized to deliver on that promise. Typically, for-profit schools use "block scheduling," in which students take only one or two classes at a time before moving on to the next block. Classes are usually held at regular and consistent hours—say, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. every day—making it possible for students juggling families and part-time jobs to build their schedules around their schoolwork. And the academics tend to be integrated into the job-oriented curricula. For instance, if you're working toward a licensed practical nursing degree, you won't be required to first pass an algebra course. Instead, instructors teach you the specific equations you'll need to know to pass your state licensing exam and to work in the field. Designing the curricula this way boosts the chances that students will succeed. Graduation rates for one- and two-year degree programs at for-profit colleges are 56 percent, substantially higher than at community colleges.

But there are problems with some of these schools, beginning with price. The average tuition at a for-profit college is about $14,000 annually, nearly six times more than at community colleges, and some charge as much as $25,000 a year. Students attending these schools often tap out their available government grants and loans. Some even wind up taking out private loans with double-digit interest rates and stiff terms. And while the best trade schools provide a solid education and help students graduate quickly and find decent jobs, the worst offer subpar training and have terrible graduation and job placement records.

What the unemployed really need are public institutions that combine the best qualities of both types of schools: the low cost and public mission of community colleges, and the quicker-to-graduation curricula and job-placement focus of the best proprietary schools. A handful of education systems around the country—in Ohio, Wisconsin, New York, and Washington State, for example—have attempted to build such programs. The most successful may be in Tennessee.

Whereas community colleges in most states offer both one-year certificate and two-year degree programs, Tennessee split these functions into different institutions when creating its community college system back in the 1960s. As a result, the state operates thirteen academically oriented community colleges as well as a separate system of twenty-seven Technology Centers. These Tech Centers specialize in one-year certifications in high-demand fields like accounting, diesel-powered equipment, computer networking, drafting and CAD technology, industrial electricity, licensed practical nursing, and dental assisting. Students pay about the same tuition—around $2,400 per year—as do Tennessee's community college students (tuition covers about 30 percent of the cost of the training at the Tech Centers; the state picks up the rest). But in terms of how they structure and deliver an education, the Tech Centers more closely resemble for-profit trade schools. Academic lessons are woven into the instruction rather than taught in separate courses. Classes are scheduled in blocks and at convenient hours, and students move through them as a group, increasing the chances that they will learn from each other (a phenomenon known to education experts as the "cohort effect"). The Tech Centers also offer rotations and apprenticeships for their students with

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employers in the state, and a data system that tracks where and when students land their first jobs and at what starting salary level—information that helps the school fine-tune its courses to make sure the skills they are teaching are the ones the market actually needs.

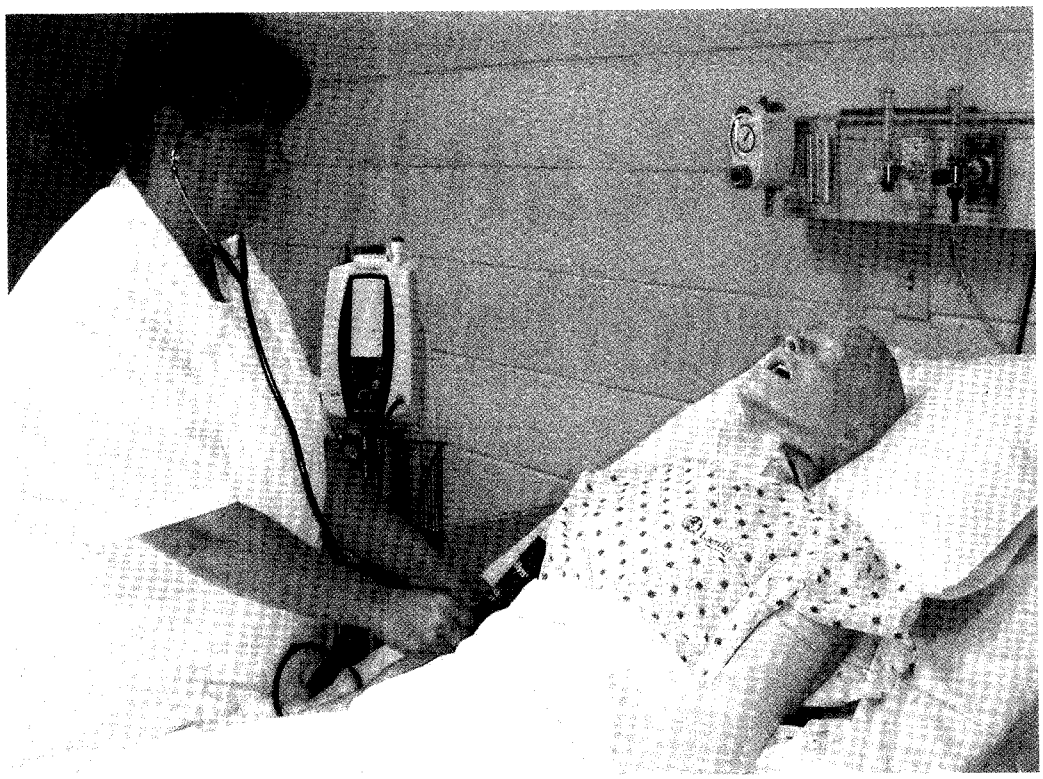
The results are impressive. About 75 percent of students who enroll at Tech Centers graduate, and 83 percent of those graduates get jobs in their fields of study and are still in those jobs a year later. Tech Centers, in other words, outperform most for-profit schools, and do so at a fraction of the cost.

If such schools can operate throughout an entire state, there's no reason that they can't do so throughout the country. And there are actions Washington can take now to encourage more states to follow Tennessee's lead. Buried in the recently passed health care reconciliation bill is $2 billion for a grant program for community colleges, over which the Obama administration enjoys considerable discretion. The president should announce that in distributing these grants, his administration will give priority to community colleges that reengineer their one- and two-year degree programs to stress timely graduation, job placement, and tracking the careers of those who graduate. A great deal of reform can be leveraged through this approach, as the administration has shown in its Race to the Top program, which applies similar tactics to K–12 education. The leaders of several large community college systems have told us that with proper funding they can have accelerated degree programs up and running in six months. This means, we estimate, that hundreds of thousands of unemployed Americans could be enrolled in such programs within two years.

Taking advantage of these new opportunities, however, will be tough for many cash-strapped people who have lost their jobs. Under the rules of unemployment insurance, which has been extended to millions more people since the financial crisis hit, recipients must confirm that they are actively looking for work and generally are not allowed to enroll in college. Last year, the president urged states to loosen these restrictions. But lawmakers can, and should, go much further. The next time they extend unemployment benefits, they should mandate that anyone eligible also has the right to attend college, as long as they're enrolled full-time in a one- or two-year degree program.

And what about the millions of Americans who've lost their jobs but don't qualify for unemployment benefits? For them, the federal government should create a new program of educational stipends. These would be modest payments to help offset the tuition and living costs of going back to school for a year or two. In effect, the stipend would become their "pay" while they are completing their "job" of getting a high-quality, workforce-ready education.

The nation has invested hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars to ensure that banks, automobile manufacturers, and other large corporations emerge from the recession on a sound footing. But with unemployment now representing a major long-term challenge for the country, why can't we invest a fraction of those sums directly in the future of the workers who are the backbone of our economy? Giving unemployed Americans the opportunity to quickly upgrade their skills in high-demand job fields and get back to supporting their families with middle-class wages is a reasonable and appropriate goal for the country. WM



Second acts: Using federal grants to reshape the way community colleges serve the needs of career-switching unemployed workers could allow more states to emulate the success of the Tennessee Technology Centers (above).

Courtesy of Tennessee Technology Centers

Jamie P. Merisotis is president and CEO of Lumina Foundation for Education. **Stan Jones** is president of Complete College America and former commissioner of higher education for the State of Indiana.

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The gatecrashers: SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket on the launch pad at Cape Canaveral.

Courtesy of SpaceX

The Wealth of Constellations

Can the Free Market Save the Space Program?

By Charles Homans

Marine Major General Charles F. Bolden has made a career of taking on daunting assignments. After growing up black in segregated South Carolina, Bolden spent his teenage years badgering congressmen into helping him gain admittance to the nearly all-white U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. Shipped out to Southeast Asia in 1972, he flew more than a hundred missions over Vietnam and Laos. After the war he spent a few years test-flying experimental aircraft, then—why not?—became an astronaut. When the space shuttle *Columbia* blasted off from Cape Canaveral in January 1986, sixteen days before the *Challenger* explosion, Bolden was in the pilot's seat. So when President Barack Obama was looking to fill the top job at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration last May, the ex-astronaut, then sixty-two and retired, seemed a natural choice. NASA was four years into its most ambitious project since Apollo, a plan to send American astronauts back to the moon and, in time, on to Mars. It needed a leader equal to the challenge.

Nine months later, however, Bolden received an assignment even tougher than overseeing the mission: getting rid of it.

Under the budget released by the Obama administration in February, NASA was to get out of the business of human spaceflight altogether, at least for the near future—no more space shuttle or rockets, no capsules or moon-landing apparatus. In their place, NASA would oversee something very different: a $6 billion, five-year contract for a handful of private companies to ferry American astronauts to and from the International Space Station—to operate a fleet of space taxis, more or less. Human spaceflight, the province of national identity and aspiration since Yuri Gagarin first hurtled into orbit, was going to be outsourced.

So it was that Bolden found himself, on a Wednesday in late February, sitting alone at a witness table on Capitol Hill—in the same Senate hearing room where he had been lavished with praise during his confirmation the previous summer—facing a panel of livid senators. "I absolutely believe," Louisiana Republican David Vitter declared, "that this budget and the vision

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it represents would end our human spaceflight program as we know it, and would surrender—at least for our lifetime, perhaps forever—our world leadership in the area." Others railed about the more parochial concerns that accompany the cancellation of giant government programs. "Those seven thousand folks directly in Florida and maybe fourteen thousand others who are impacted—what are we going to say to them?" demanded Senator George LeMieux, Republican of Florida, whose Space Coast depended on NASA and its contractors for jobs. Even Robert "Hoot" Gibson, the commander on Bolden's first shuttle mission, was called to testify against the plan. "This abrupt change in NASA's exploration approach has no clear path," he told the panel. "No destination. No milestones. No program focus."

Bolden's wiry five-foot-seven frame, already diminished by a big-around-the-shoulders suit jacket, seemed to shrink further as the speeches and interrogations wore on—they weren't so much questions to be answered as questions to be endured, and the administrator gamely endured them for an hour and a half. "I—I really do look forward to continuing to work with you all," he said as he finally stood up to leave. "We'll get it right."

In the hallway a scrum of half a dozen reporters was waiting. "Mr. Administrator—" one of them called out, but Bolden just nodded politely and kept walking, the soles of his shoes clopping against the marble. The scrum followed, shouting questions: What exactly was the plan? Did NASA still intend to go to Mars? When? How? The administrator's brisk walk now bordered on a jog. Just before the pack spilled into the rotunda at the end of the hall, an Associated Press correspondent managed to plant himself in front of Bolden. "Mr. Administrator," he said, panting, "what is your vision? *When are you going to have a vision?*" Bolden stopped and looked up at him, a plaintive note in his voice. "I think I *have* a vision," he said.

The Vision: It is constantly invoked at NASA, at once the government's most relentlessly technical and most airily mystical agency. (The Office of Housing and Urban Development does not talk about the Vision.) NASA's goals and ambitions have never been particularly justifiable in any concrete sense; when Wernher von Braun, the ex-Nazi rocket scientist who designed the Apollo program's Saturn rockets, was asked what the purpose of going to the moon was, he replied, "What is the purpose of a newborn baby? We find out in time." You could get away with that in NASA's 1960s glory days, when the agency's accomplishments were splashed across newspapers' front pages and its mantra, posted on the walls of its contractors' rocket factories, was "Waste anything but time."

But once the space race was won and Americans' attentions returned to the planet they lived on, NASA's focus gradually shifted away from the Vision and toward the goal of every aging bureaucracy: survival. The space agency has spent decades in a holding pattern, sinking billions of dollars into projects of questionable usefulness and limited popularity—the space shuttle and the International Space Station—that have kept astronauts and engineers occupied, but have also left the agency even less able to pay for the frontier-expanding ventures that were once its hallmark. One administration after another has struggled to find its way out of this conundrum, announcing Mars missions, lunar bases, and plans for exotic new spacecraft. But these projects have almost always failed to pan out, leaving the agency more cash-strapped than it was before, at which point NASA quietly goes back to the old shuttle routine and hopes that no one really notices. "The agency has been sort of wandering in the desert for forty years," says Scott Horowitz, a former astronaut and Bush-era NASA associate administrator.

What is different now is that for the first time, the old routine is no longer an option. The shuttle is slated to make its final flight next year—the production lines for its fuel tanks have already been shut down—and the agency has nothing ready to take its place. This means that NASA won't have a vehicle to reach the International Space Station it has spent eleven years and $48.5 billion building—and will find its knowledge of how to pull off human spaceflight atrophying rapidly. It's a hell of a bind: NASA must choose between spending a heap of money continuing the meet the obligations of the present—the space station missions and other activities in earth's orbit—and directing its resources toward the ambitions of the future, new exploratory missions that might be decades away from happening and are hardly guaranteed to even happen at all. In the midst of a recession, it can't do both.

The Obama administration's NASA plan is an attempt to escape this fix. While the details have yet to be hammered out, and still await passage by an inevitably hostile Congress, the idea in a nutshell is this: if NASA helps commercial companies get their rockets onto the launch pad, and those companies find a market for their services beyond NASA, the agency's human spaceflight program will finally be free of its expensive obligations to maintain its rudimentary orbit-oriented activities. Instead of spending billions a year on shuttle launches, the agency can simply book astronauts on commercial flights for $20 million or so a pop. With the money it saves, NASA can redouble its research and development efforts to acquire the technology it needs to push the boundaries of exploration once again. It's this potential for the expeditions of the future—and aerospace jobs in the present—that Obama emphasized in a speech at Cape Canaveral in April aimed at stemming a growing political backlash against his new policy. But for this to happen, the other part of the plan has to work—low-earth-orbit space travel has to go from being a resource-sucking government program to an efficient business.

The best reason to think this idea is not completely crazy is because something like it has happened before. In 1925, when air travel was still in its infancy, Congress passed the Kelly Airmail Act, which allowed commercial airlines to bid on U.S. Postal Service delivery contracts. The government backing allowed the fledgling airlines to expand their routes and service offerings; demand for cargo service increased, and, as flight got cheaper and came to be viewed as a normal and non-death-defying means of getting places, passenger service increased, too. Through a combination of private-sector ingenuity and government seed money, a new industry was willed into existence.

But even the earliest, most rickety commercial airlines at least enjoyed the advantage of traveling between places where

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people lived; it was easy enough to think of things that needed to go from point A to point B, and could stand to get there faster. Commercial spaceflight, by contrast, has to contend with the fact that there aren't many things that actually need to be done in space. In effect, the rocket builders don't just have to figure out how to serve a market—they have to create one. The plan is risky in more serious ways, too: NASA is gambling that private corporations, some of them as yet untested in spaceflight, can carry astronauts to the space station more safely than the space shuttle, even as the agency exercises less safety oversight over them—a plan that runs counter to the recommendations of every major accident investigation NASA has conducted.

That NASA is willing to put all its chips on a bet as dubious seeming as this one is a testament to the uncomfortable straits in which the agency finds itself as it settles into middle age. One of the government's last great throwbacks to the Cold War, NASA's human spaceflight program has finally reached a point where it can no longer ignore the looming question of what it is, exactly, we're doing in space. And it's hoping that its new commercial partners can figure out the answer.

Under the budget released by the Obama administration in February, NASA was to get out of the business of human spaceflight altogether, at least for the near future—no more space shuttle or rockets, no capsules or moon-landing apparatus.

The agency that has landed a dozen men on the moon, photographed the birth of distant stars, and (if you believe the most dramatic of the astronaut-penned op-eds) will find us a way off the only planet our species has ever known once we pollute it out of habitability, operates out of a Washington office space that is more modest than the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms'. To be fair, the mind-bending stuff mostly happens elsewhere—the sprawling launch complex at Cape Canaveral, the research centers in California and Alabama—but still, if it weren't for the flags, from the outside you could mistake the place for a law firm. One forlorn space suit—*Apollo 8* commander Frank Borman's—sits in a display case in the lobby; the security guards have to semiregularly inform perplexed tourists that if they wish to see more of them, the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum is four blocks away.

The headquarters befit a perennially beleaguered organization, one tasked with carrying out what may be the most absurd mandate in the federal government. Every year NASA is asked to do things that border on the impossible, but is given only $18.7 billion to do them—about what we spend annually on farm subsidies, and a rounding error in the $708.3 billion Pentagon budget. The military spends as much on combat-simulation video games each year as NASA spends on the space shuttle.

Still, NASA's budget would probably be adequate for the scientifically path-breaking work that the agency, and nobody else, does: the probes and telescopes charting near and distant corners of the universe, the satellite-based cosmology experiments, the earth observation missions that untangle the complexities of the planet's climate and weather. The problem is that most people don't care about those things. Not long ago, NASA commissioned a study of Americans' attitudes toward the space program by the Center for Cultural Studies & Analysis, a market research think tank that had previously worked for the Six Flags amusement park chain and the National Alliance for Musical Theater. The forty-six-page report the group delivered provides an elegant summation of the agency's bind. "In the mind of the public," it concludes, "human exploration is NASA's brand. The space quest is a human equation, not just a technical mission." The further NASA got from that mission, the more the agency shifted in taxpayers' eyes "from a household item to a luxury item"—the sort of thing that would be nice to have, but not necessarily if money is tight. NASA's two manned ventures, the space shuttle and the International Space Station, didn't really count—what really galvanized Americans were *firsts*, missions that pushed the boundary of known experience. But those missions were massively expensive, and it was unclear whether the country could muster the will to finance anything like them again. "Failure of NASA's vision to resonate with the American public to the point where it inspires action is a reflection of a larger problem," the analysts write: "the U.S. currently has no larger shared vision into which NASA's vision can fit."

The space agency's last great bid to figure a way out of this spot began on January 14, 2004, with George W. Bush. In a speech at NASA headquarters just shy of the one-year anniversary of *Columbia*'s immolation upon reentry over Texas, Bush laid out a new direction for the agency: he would send astronauts back to the moon for the first time since 1972, he declared, no later than 2020. And the moon was only the beginning—from there they would go to Mars, the grand ambition of space travel since the early twentieth century. "Mankind is drawn to the heavens for the same reason we were once drawn into unknown lands and across the open sea," Bush said. "We choose to explore space because doing so improves our lives and lifts our national spirit." The speech was a fantastically odd moment—Bush had never before evinced much interest in space exploration, and, indeed, the NASA speech was the first and last time he spoke publicly of his vision. The task of filling in the details ultimately fell to Michael Griffin, who took over as NASA administrator the following year.

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A brilliant and imperious engineer with half a dozen advanced degrees to his name, Griffin was seen by his admirers as perhaps the closest that NASA could get to another Wernher von Braun, the defining visionary of the Apollo years. There was little doubt that Griffin saw this in himself, too; in his last days in office, NASA spent $57,000 publishing a handsome bound volume of his collected speeches, entitled *Leadership in Space*. If Bush had set the goal, it was Griffin who fleshed out not just the means of attaining it, but also the argument for doing so. In a speech delivered to an industry group in California early in his tenure, he warned that if the United States were to fall behind Russia and China in the quest to expand the frontier of human spaceflight, it would translate into diminished greatness and influence back on earth. "We must think carefully," he said, "about what the world of tomorrow will look like if the United States is not the preeminent spacefaring nation."

Rocket Man: SpaceX founder Elon Musk in the company's Los Angeles factory in 2008.

Getty Images

Coming from the top of an agency that had grown accustomed to justifying human spaceflight with diplomacy and science, Griffin's blunt nationalism was unabashedly retro—and the plan he had for NASA's next step was no less so. Called Constellation, it consisted of a family of rockets named Ares, a gumdrop-shaped crew module named Orion, and a lunar lander named Altair. Griffin joked that it was "Apollo on steroids," and indeed, the artist's renderings of the components looked like they could have come off von Braun's drafting table. After a quarter century of the space shuttle, here again was the sleek white pillar, twice the height of the shuttle on the launch pad, topped with a nub of a capsule that would carry the astronauts back to the frontiers they had abandoned when "American Pie" still ruled the pop charts.

When he announced his plan, Bush had laid out one hard-and-fast rule: the new mission had to be accomplished within NASA's existing budget, with modest increases to keep pace with inflation. The order suggested just how unserious the president was about the project. Apollo, which aimed to accomplish the same moon shot on a comparable timeline, had at its peak eaten up more than 5 percent of the federal budget, nearly ten times NASA's share in 2004. The space station, a more modest undertaking, was projected to cost the space agency as much as $96 billion over the life of the project; honest outside estimates of a Mars journey pegged its likely cost at five times that.

But in fact, Bush's budget was even more inadequate than it looked at first blush. The official plan was to use the money from the soon-to-be-canceled shuttle program to fuel Constellation's growth. But the administration had ignored the fact that about half the shuttle's budget was tied up in fixed costs that wouldn't disappear with the craft itself, things like test facilities and Mission Control operations. It was magical thinking masquerading as fiscal responsibility.

The short-sightedness of the administration's accounting became clear when Constellation started running into technical problems, as new NASA programs inevitably do. As the Ares rockets began to take shape, engineers realized that the solid-fuel boosters they had adapted from the space shuttle caused a number of problems in the new design. Most critically, they found that when the first stage burned out, the engine could loose violent vibrations up the shaft to the capsule that housed the astronauts, shaking them so badly they would be unable to read the instrument panels. Mitigating the problem would require years of testing, and billions of dollars—which, of course, Constellation didn't have.

Searching for funding within the zero-sum confines of the NASA budget, Griffin began dipping into other projects' accounts. Soon Constellation was not only behind schedule, but forcing the cancellation of more useful NASA research and technology development programs. By 2009 Ares's first flight was optimistically projected for 2015 and realistically years after that, and the estimated cost of building the rockets had grown from $14.4 billion to $35 billion. The moon base, to say nothing of Mars, receded into the distant future. What had begun as an audacious bid for NASA's past glory was quickly becoming a very expensive means of continuing the dull obligations of the present, the perfunctory trips to and from the International Space Station—something Griffin had long scoffed at as a waste of time and resources. And even that wouldn't be possible until years after the space shuttle was scheduled to be retired, meaning that American astronauts who wanted to get to the station

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would be reduced to paying to hitch rides with the Russians, whose Soyuz rocket and capsule would be the only means of getting into orbit.

Desperate for something to show for their work, Constellation's engineers eventually cobbled together a rocket, the Ares I-X, for an October 2009 test flight. But it was really just a mock-up of the still-nonexistent real thing—assembled from a spare shuttle booster and preexisting military rocket electronics, with a fake upper stage and capsule, it resembled Griffin's original vision in shape alone.

Preoccupied with his ambitions, Griffin had made the classic engineer's error: in drawing up his grand designs, he had simply assumed the money he needed to make them happen would be there. As a result, he left his successors with a far bigger mess than he had inherited. If there was one thing his NASA tenure proved, it was that the human spaceflight program's problem wasn't a lack of ambition—it was getting someone to pay for it. In trying to figure their way out of the same box, his successors would steer a course in the opposite direction.

nitely fell into it," she told me when I visited her in her Washington office this spring. With her bright lemon-yellow jacket and her chestnut hair pulled into a loose bun, Garver looked less like the archetypal NASA bureaucrat than she did a well-heeled fortysomething suburban lawyer, and she spoke with a conversational ease uncommon in an agency full of engineers and retired military officers. After the Glenn campaign, Garver went on to spend thirteen years at the National Space Society, an advocacy organization aimed at shoring up public and congressional support for space exploration, followed by five years at NASA during the Clinton administration. Her closest brush with spaceflight occurred in 2002, when she was working as a private aerospace consultant. A client of hers, a wealthy CEO and aspiring space tourist, abruptly backed out of his plans to fly to the International Space Station aboard a Russian Soyuz rocket. Desperate to fill the vacancy in the capsule, the Russians dropped the price of the seat, and it occurred to Garver that, with enough sponsorships, she might be able to make the trip herself.

LEFT: Michael Griffin, George W. Bush's NASA administrator, details his plans for a new lunar landing mission in 2005; **RIGHT:** Future NASA Deputy Administrator Lori Garver and N*SYNC member Lance Bass hold a press conference in Moscow in May 2002 to discuss their plans to travel to the International Space Station as tourists.

Photos: Getty Images

Although the Obama administration and NASA have remained relentlessly mum about who exactly charted NASA's new course, both its supporters and its detractors tend to believe that its most novel element—the outsourcing of human spaceflight—bears the fingerprints of the agency's new deputy administrator, Lori Garver, rather than Charles Bolden. Garver was Obama's space policy adviser during the campaign, the head of his NASA transition team, and a longstanding champion of commercial space travel. And there's not much on her superior's resume that suggests a desire to upend NASA's status quo—in fact, during the administrator search Bolden had been championed by Constellation supporters like Florida Senator Bill Nelson because he seemed the candidate least likely to scrap it.

Garver landed in space policy more or less accidentally, after working on former astronaut John Glenn's 1984 presidential campaign during her first year out of college. "I defi-

Garver (who had two young sons at the time) dubbed herself the "Astromom," and a deal with the Discovery Channel was soon in the offing. She traveled to the Russian cosmonaut training facility of Star City for medical testing, and went so far as to have her gall bladder removed to meet the physical requirements for the trip. But fate intervened again, and even more bizarrely, in the form of Lance Bass, a member of the boy band N*SYNC, who announced he was also interested in the ticket. Bass and Garver held a surreal joint press conference in Moscow, but by then it was clear that the preteen idol would be able to put together the money for the trip first. Garver returned to Washington, and politics, working on the presidential campaigns of John Kerry in 2004 and both Hillary Clinton and Obama in 2008.

This background—long on politics, minor celebrity, and commerce, short on science, engineering, and government or military service—is unusual for NASA, and it explains part of why Garver has attracted considerable controversy at her new

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post. During the presidential transition in December 2008, Griffin (who declined to comment for this story) stonewalled Garver, refusing to hand over documentation of the Constellation project to her transition team. When the two bumped into each other at a book party shortly before Christmas, Garver confronted him about it. "Mike, I don't understand what the problem is," she said, according to witnesses who described the incident to the *Orlando Sentinel*. "We are just trying to look under the hood."

"If you are looking under the hood, then you are calling me a liar," Griffin shot back. "Because it means you don't trust what I say is under the hood." (Garver smiled when I asked her about the confrontation. "Transitions are tense times," she said, "and not everyone handles them well.")

When I talked with other veterans of the Griffin era, many of whom professed to have known and liked Garver for years, they spoke of her rise to influence the way a concert violinist would speak of a kid juggling an eighteenth-century Stradivarius next to a fireplace. Their grand fear is that the new NASA plan amounts to the twilight of the heroic engineer: that an agency that seemed poised to reclaim the greatness of its heyday will now be reduced to aimless tinkering. "Constellation got off to a false start, but there was a goal," says Scott Horowitz, the ex-astronaut and NASA official, who worked under Griffin at the agency. "This new budget basically throws out any government ability to provide human spaceflight for the foreseeable future."

Garver, naturally, sees it differently. "This is an attempt to utilize the best the industry has to offer," she told me. "They've all been telling us, 'Government is too hands-on, you're not providing value added.' It's a way for them to lean forward more, us to back off more, and do the harder things." The theory is that the agency can extract itself from the expensive, time-consuming, and not particularly useful business of low-earth-orbit travel—as opposed to long hauls to the moon or beyond—that has defined human spaceflight since the end of Apollo, and free up NASA's relatively limited resources for the research and development it needs to undertake before it can send astronauts further out into the solar system. Maintaining shuttle service to the International Space Station eats up a third of NASA's annual budget, and for years NASA hasn't really been able to convincingly explain why we're spending the money. The best justification the agency has mustered for the space station—which in truth isn't of much use for scientific research—is that without it, the space shuttle doesn't really have anywhere to go. The main reasoning for continuing the shuttle program, and for coming up with a successor to it, is that otherwise we don't have a means of getting to the space station.

By outsourcing its routine space transportation needs, the agency is essentially throwing the question of what it is we're trying to accomplish by going to space to the private sector. (In April, the Obama administration tried to compromise with Constellation's defenders by proposing keeping the Orion capsule part of the project, but only as an emergency escape vehicle—a kind of lifeboat—for the space station, not a means of transporting astronauts to it.) The ideological contortions involved here attest to just what a strange corner of politics it is that the space program occupies. Republican politicians and conservative pundits have beaten up on Obama for ending one of the most inefficient, government-dominated ventures in history—the *Washington Post*'s Charles Krauthammer called the decision "a constricted inward-looking call to retreat"—in favor of something bordering on galactic Milton Friedmanism: the administration is gambling that in the post-post–Cold War era, the market has a better idea of what's worth doing in orbit than the government does. "It's hard to swallow from a national pride standpoint, but I don't know why it should be," says Marco Caceres, an analyst with the Teal Group, an aerospace market research firm. "The potential is there to grow new industries, to grow our economy. China can put a flag on the moon, but so what? We'll be sending people into low earth orbit, and building whole new businesses. If we let private industry take the lead, it'll be private companies that figure out what's actually worth doing."

The companies the government is trusting to solve this existential riddle are a mix of familiar contractors and would-be gatecrashers, all of which are offering elements of a rocket-and-capsule design which, like Constellation, harkens back to the pre-shuttle space program. One of the two particularly serious contenders is Orbital Sciences, a veteran Pentagon contractor that has been launching military satellites for years. The other is Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX, a wildly ambitious start-up launched in 2002 by PayPal cofounder Elon Musk with the intention of building a fleet of commercial rockets that could be launched into orbit at a fraction of the currently available price. Musk is the closest thing the nascent commercial spaceflight industry has to a Howard Hughes, a brilliant polymath with an apparently endless appetite for plowing his own considerable fortune into world-changing endeavors (he is also the founder of the electric carmaker Tesla). Although his company is still in its infancy, SpaceX managed to build a rocket from scratch and loft a satellite into orbit in just six years. That's something that most countries, let alone companies, couldn't pull off.

The biggest hurdle Musk and others have to clear, however, isn't technical. After all, aerospace companies have known how to build rockets for half a century—they just haven't found people to pay for them. Although its plans are still unsettled, NASA is unlikely to need more than a few flights a year to bring astronauts to the International Space Station, and a few more to bring cargo there. A single commercial launch company, however, needs more—possibly many more—launches than that each year to stay in the black. That means it will have to find other customers.

What else could these rockets do besides fly stuff to the space station? The only option that really exists today is satellites. The market for launching them is worth somewhere in the neighborhood of $2.5 billion, but it's barely growing. "It's a very, very conservative market," Caceres says. "It's not one you can say is going to double or triple a few years from now." To grow demand, a start-up would have to offer something radically cheaper than what's available today—for instance, the price of launching a small satellite, Caceres says, would have to fall from the going rate of about $10 million to something on the order of

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$6 to $8 million—something no aspiring commercial provider can seriously promise.

If the new providers can't offer the bargain-basement prices necessary to expand the satellite market, they'll be stuck trying to undercut the existing players—which isn't much easier. The market is dominated by foreign companies that are subsidized, in fact or in practice, by foreign governments. And because satellites are expensive and there are reliable operators available to send them heavenward, few of their owners are willing to stick with a newcomer through the steep learning curve of its early years—which invariably involve blowing up a lot of rockets—unless it's *really* cheap. (Three of the five Falcon 1 rockets that SpaceX has launched to date have crashed into the ocean—including one that was carrying the ashes of James Doohan, the actor who played Scotty on *Star Trek*.) Sea Launch, a Boeing spinoff that succeeded briefly as a freestanding commercial enterprise, filed for bankruptcy protection last summer, after the cost of its rockets increased and one of them blew up on the launch pad. Customers fled en masse.

Aside from satellites, the other option is the holy grail of the commercial spaceflight industry: flying people to space. But beyond the taxi trips to the space station, the pickings are pretty slim, and mostly theoretical. It's possible that other countries' astronauts would want to buy seats on flights to the space station, but NASA hasn't gauged the extent of the interest. Another option is space tourism. This notion has generated enthusiasm among entrepreneurs; a company called Bigelow Aerospace wants to launch its own inflatable space modules into orbit, which could function as zero-gravity laboratories or even space hotels. And there are inklings of a market here: Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic has done a brisk business selling tickets on future flights aboard the sleek, otherworldly space plane the company has in development.

NASA's human spaceflight program has finally reached a point where it can no longer ignore the looming question of what it is, exactly, we're doing in space. And it's hoping that its new commercial partners can figure out the answer.

The problem, though, is that the experience Branson is offering tourists is far cheaper and simpler than the sort of thing that the companies hoping to contract with NASA will be doing with their rockets. Virgin Galactic's aircraft will travel sixty-some miles to the edge of the atmosphere and back, what's known as suborbital flight—it technically qualifies as space travel, but it's orders of magnitude less difficult and expensive than reaching orbit, a several-hundred-mile proposition requiring forty times the energy of Branson's day trips. Seats on a Virgin Galactic flight go for $200,000, sailing-around-the-world-on-a-yacht money. But a slot on a commercial flight to the space station would cost *$20 million*. In fact, you can already fly there at that price the way that Lori Garver intended to, with the Russian Federal Space Agency—space tour packages have been available for a decade, and so far there have been only eight takers.

If other customers fail to materialize for the companies that NASA is betting on, the agency finds itself in an awkward spot. The whole point of paying for launch services, rather than bankrolling contractors' ever-metastasizing costs for entire projects, is that it's supposed to be cheaper. But if a company can't find other work, it has to spread its costs out over fewer launches to make its budget—which means the individual launches become more expensive. And if NASA wants to send anything into orbit at all, it has to pay the new prices, whatever they are.

That was how events played out for the Department of Defense fifteen years ago, when it embarked on a strategy similar to NASA's. The military was in the market for a new fleet of rockets to launch defense satellites, to replace its aging Titan IV. At the time, analysts were projecting a huge boom in the demand for commercial satellites, largely driven by an anticipated explosion in the satellite phone market. The Pentagon figured that if it awarded start-up grants to the most promising companies, it could hasten the arrival of a bona fide commercial launch business in the United States; once the rocket builders were up and running, they would have hordes of new customers from the satellite phone industry, and the military could buy their services on a per-launch basis at a reasonable price. Lockheed Martin and McDonnell Douglas (which was acquired by Boeing shortly thereafter) won the contract, and were handed $2.5 billion over the first three years of the project to get the job done.

Over the following years, however, cellular phone companies, the satellite phone providers' rivals in the mobile phone market, began extending the reach of their signals with cheap and easy-to-build repeating towers. The market for cell phones began to grow exponentially, while the one for the far pricier satellite phones all but vanished—along with the demand for satellites. By the time Boeing and Lockheed Martin had actual rockets ready for testing, no one required their services but the military. "The lesson that we learned is that there's market risk, technical risk, and operational risk," says Michael Gass, the president and chief executive officer of United Launch Alliance, the Boeing–Lockheed Martin joint venture that completed the contract. "The companies are good at the technical and operational risks. The market side is something that might be too hard to forecast."

Because the Pentagon needed the rockets, it had no choice but to cover the rocket builders' expenses, which soon grew enormous. The projected cost of a launch jumped 77 percent from 2002 to 2003 alone, and another 29 percent the following year—an increase so great that Defense Secretary Donald

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Rumsfeld had to formally vouch for the program's necessity to national defense just to make it kosher with defense contracting laws. In 2005 the Defense Department called a spade a spade and quietly redrew the program as the standard cost-plus contracting arrangement that in practice it had already become, and later changed its status to make it subject to fewer budgetary oversight requirements. As of late 2008 the Government Accountability Office calculated its total price tag to date at $8.2 billion—and the rockets were still in the test-launching stage. Even without considering the cost of program development, the price per launch, originally budgeted at a little under $73 million, had grown to $170 million.

End of an era: NASA Administrator Charles Bolden watches the launch of the space shuttle *Endeavor* in February, the shuttle's second-to-last scheduled flight.

Getty Images

If there's a lesson to be drawn from this saga it's that the difference between a government contractor and a commercial company whose only customer is the government is academic at best. And in fact, the Pentagon's experience is already repeating itself at NASA, which in 2006 began a similarly structured $500 million program to commission rockets that could deliver cargo to the space station. SpaceX, the contract recipient that is furthest along in development, was supposed to have tested three Falcon 9 rockets by last September; as of this writing, it was about to test its first. NASA, meanwhile, is asking for an extra $312 million for the companies in its fiscal year 2011 budget to speed things along. And in spite of the risk the agency faces if its launch companies can't find other customers, the agency hasn't commissioned any studies of the potential market for their services—instead, it's relied on the predictions of the companies themselves.

Rocket makers also face a whole new challenge if they want to go from launching satellites and cargo to launching people: namely, not killing them. NASA has said that whatever the next vehicle it entrusts with astronauts' lives is, it should have less than a one in a thousand chance of a fatal accident (the odds on a round-trip space shuttle mission are about one in eighty-five). Commercial providers claim that they can do this without intrusive or expensive NASA oversight. But the fact is that for decades NASA has been experimenting with letting contractors monitor themselves, and the results haven't been good.

The reason for this is that while most rocket-building expertise resides in the private sector—12,000 companies were involved in *Apollo 11* alone—most of the institutional knowledge of how to pull off a manned spaceflight safely remains inside NASA. The less the two overlap, the more crucial information falls through the cracks. Both the *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters were the result of seemingly minor technical problems whose significance wasn't appreciated up the shuttle program's chain of command. In both cases investigators pinned the blame in part on communication failures between NASA and its contractors, and NASA's diminished oversight over them. Put simply, NASA knew too little about the spacecraft it was flying.

The panel investigating the *Challenger* accident recommended "the total combination of NASA and contractor organizations, working more effectively on a coordinated basis at all levels" in order to avoid repeating the tragedy. At first NASA heeded the investigators' advice, but the inquiry into the subsequent *Columbia* disaster found that once budget pressures reasserted themselves, the shuttle program had gone back to cutting corners. "The change was cost-efficient," the *Columbia* investigators wrote, "but personnel cuts reduced oversight of contractors at the same time that the agency's dependence upon contractor engineering judgment increased." Miscommunication between an oversight-deprived NASA and its contractors has also been blamed for less tragic, more farcical failures. In 1999, the agency lost a $125 million unmanned Mars probe somewhere in the Red Planet's atmosphere due to a navigational failure. The problem, it turned out, was that the contractor, Lockheed Martin, had given NASA all of its data on the program in Imperial units. The space agency used the metric system.

Safely overseeing the development of a commercial venture's human-ready vehicle is possible, of course, but it costs money. How much, exactly, is the multibillion-dollar question. Would-be taxi providers have thrown out numbers, ranging from a highly unlikely low end of $300 million to an only slightly less unlikely high end of $1.5 billion. But the truth is that no one really knows—NASA hasn't figured out yet what its requirements will be. The agency has spoken of doing less over-

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sight and more "insight"—that is, working with the commercial ventures to come up with a safety code and trusting them to follow it. But it's not hard to see the huge problem that this sets up: would you trust a company whose business is entirely dependent on fixed-price government contracts not to cut corners when nobody's looking?

There's also the question of liability: if something does happen, who's on the hook? Recovering the remnants of *Columbia* and investigating its last flight cost $454 million—enough to sink a fledgling company, which would almost certainly have to put its operations on hold throughout a lengthy investigation. Similarly, a serious problem with the space station could obliterate a company's customer base for months or years. Would-be commercial providers say they wouldn't even get into the business unless the government provided an assurance of bailing them out in the event of a disaster.

Commercial providers claim that they can build safe, astronaut-ready rockets without intrusive or expensive NASA oversight. But the fact is that for decades NASA has been experimenting with letting contractors monitor themselves, and the results haven't been good.

All in all, these are not terms that make investors salivate: initial capital in the high hundreds of millions, wildly unpredictable long-term costs, an unproven and possibly nonexistent market, the threat of gargantuan liabilities, and reliance on a single customer that is subject to the whims of Congress and the White House, and might not need the services for more than the next ten years—after all, there's no guarantee that the International Space Station will stay in orbit beyond 2020. Which may be why, for all of NASA's optimism, the people who are willing to sink money into commercial spaceflight are the same as they've always been: existing contractors assured of government backing, and idealistic billionaires. SpaceX, the only serious contender that aspires to be a true freestanding commercial venture, is supported almost entirely by NASA and Musk's own money—although the company is privately held, it lists just two outside investors (including a fund run by Musk's PayPal cofounders), and press reports have pegged their stake in the company at about $35 million, about a tenth of what NASA and Musk are collectively betting on the venture.

In March, while the brouhaha over the new NASA plans was in full swing on Capitol Hill and at Cape Canaveral, a less politically charged bit of news from the agency was mostly lost in the shuffle. Researchers at Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory reported that they had successfully uploaded new software to *Opportunity*, one of the two rovers NASA had landed on Mars six years earlier. With the upgrade the rover would be able to use its onboard camera to scan swaths of the Martian landscape in search of rocks of shapes and sizes that suggested scientific interest, and focus on them—to see and think for itself, in a narrow sense.

It was another milestone for one of NASA's most successful endeavors in recent memory. Over the six years they have spent roaming the Red Planet, *Opportunity* and its sibling, *Spirit*, have mined rock samples, charted craters and mountains, and found evidence suggesting the existence of long-evaporated seas on the planet. The rovers have sent back a stream of fascinating photographs: windswept panoramas, microscopic mineral formations, even an eerily moving picture of a sunset, the familiar star appearing from Mars's greater distance as a wan pinpoint of light dropping toward an alien horizon. And they have done all of it for less than a fifth of the budget that the space shuttle program chews up in a single year.

For all the chest-thumping nationalism and science-fiction fantasy that attends human spaceflight, the fact is that most of the truly astonishing things that NASA has accomplished since Apollo have been done not by astronauts in orbit, but by engineers and researchers in labs much closer to home, operating unmanned machines like the Mars rovers and the Hubble telescope. In the years that the shuttle program has burned through upwards of $170 billion—and fourteen crew members' lives—to perform research on subjects like the effects of weightlessness on spiders, earthbound researchers working with a fraction of those resources have discovered hundreds of planets beyond our own solar system, found cosmic evidence of the Big Bang, and begun to pinpoint the age of the Universe. By the time the first astronaut sets foot on Mars—by even the most optimistic estimates—probes and robots will have scoured the planet's atmosphere and surface for half a century.

In turning away from the Bush-era NASA's ambitions, the Obama administration has tacitly acknowledged that human spaceflight, as it has been practiced for half a century, has become something anachronistic and difficult to justify. "We're not trying to rebuild that system," Garver told me. "It was overbuilt." But in betting taxpayer money on the nascent commercial spaceflight industry's promises of an orbiting free market waiting to be born, the agency has shown that it hasn't fully cut itself loose from its old gambler's impulses: the belief that the next paradigm of manned space exploration, the thing that will make all of this worthwhile, is just around the corner. And if not—well, space is a lonely and expensive place. WM

Charles Homans is an editor of the *Washington Monthly*.

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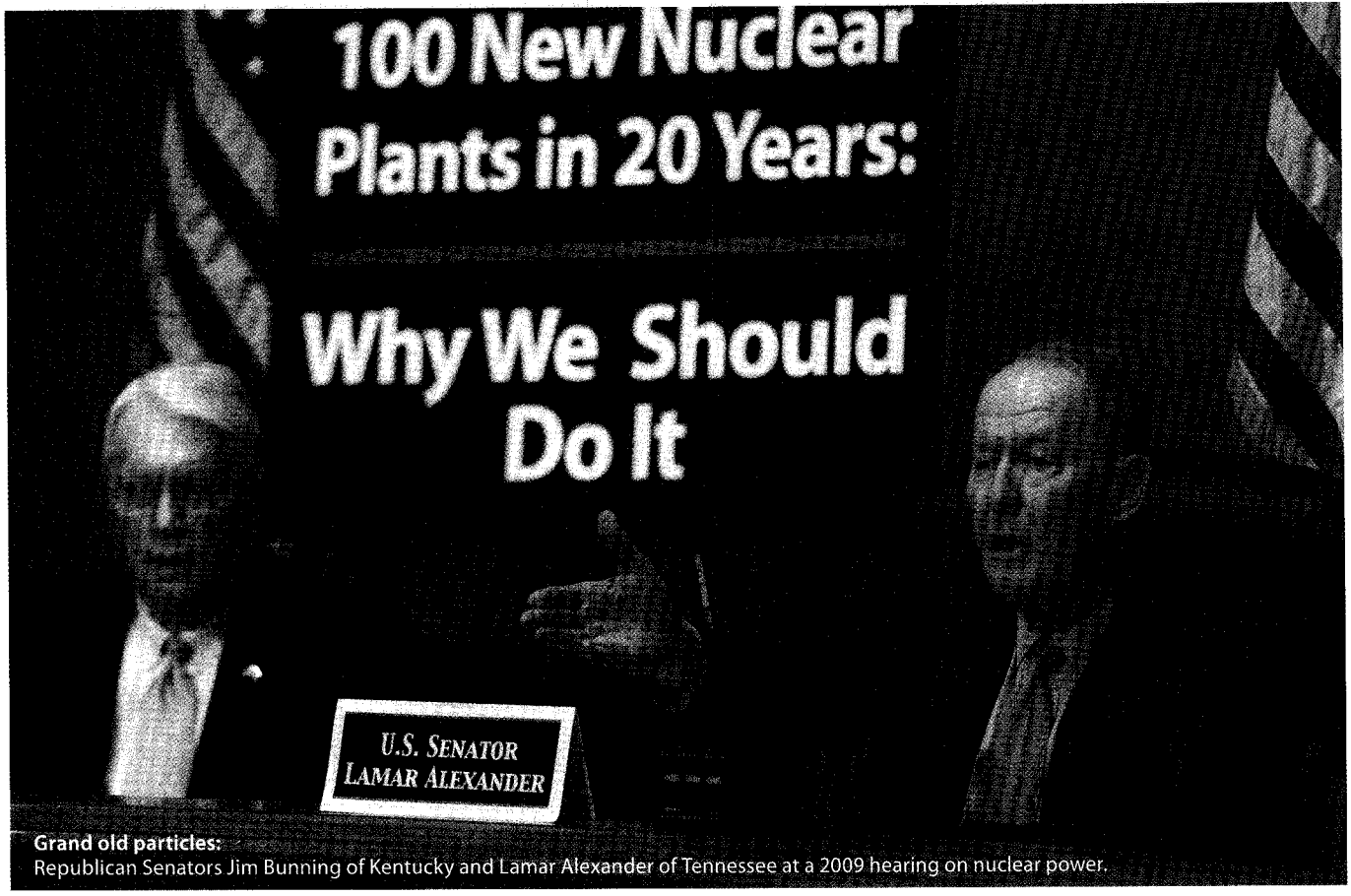

Grand old particles: Republican Senators Jim Bunning of Kentucky and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee at a 2009 hearing on nuclear power.

Congressional Quarterly/Getty Images

Nuclear Reactionaries

It's a big-government-dependent tool to fight climate change that was championed by Jimmy Carter, is now dominated by the French, and has never managed to compete in the marketplace. So why, exactly, do Republicans love nuclear power so much?

By T. A. Frank

When the White House released a budget proposal in February calling for $54 billion worth of federal loan guarantees for the construction of nuclear power plants, part of the idea was to woo the other side of the aisle. Congressional Republicans had spent the better part of a year blocking a piece of climate legislation known as the Waxman-Markey Bill, and it was hoped that some nuclear seduction might soften their opposition. Even if the White House had no luck with the GOP, what would be the harm—really—of firing up some new reactors? Much as tort reform is widely seen as a legitimate Republican goal in the pursuit of cutting health care costs, or the curbing of teacher's union power is seen as a reasonable Republican aim in the pursuit of education reform, so too adding more nuclear power to the energy mix is widely considered a reasonable Republican priority in formulating a balanced energy policy. We're adults, right? Surely, we're done blubbering over *Silkwood*. Many Democrats now seem to embrace nuclear power almost as heartily as their Republican colleagues.

Well, Republicans can love nuclear if they want. And Democrats can indulge them in some conciliatory fission if they want. But the rest of us shouldn't have to smile politely. Nor should we pretend that the bedfellows are anything but bizarre. The GOP and nuclear power are such old friends, like Tarzan and Cheeta, that we forget to reflect on the oddity of the relationship. At least Tarzan and Cheeta had compatible policy priorities, such as defense against crocodiles. But the nuclear industry and the Republican Party have nothing ideologically obvious in common other than a soft spot for things that go boom. That they've teamed up all the same says something—all too much, really—about our politics today.

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Anyone with even a passing interest in politics knows that Republicans stand for a few bedrock ideas. One is that the market knows better than politicians. (Republicans don't favor "using the government in Washington to pick winners and losers," Senator Lamar Alexander once told Wolf Blitzer.) Another is that bailouts and subsidies are a waste of money. ("[T]here is no guarantee that financial assistance from taxpayer dollars will prevent these companies from collapsing," said Lisa Murkowski, explaining her vote against loans to the auto industry.) So how does a push for expanded nuclear energy match up with such convictions? At the risk of oversimplifying, the short answer is "Not at all." And the long answer is "Um, not at all."

If there's any energy program that's more Big Government than nuclear power, it would have to involve the harvesting of millions of humans in pods for their body heat. (This was outlined in *The Matrix*, but Congress has yet to take up the plan.) Nuclear power is the king of subsidized energy industries, with its very origin in government—from Truman-era research into nuclear fission, to the launch of Atoms for Peace under Eisenhower. The original idea, sixty years ago, was to give the whole business a push, with some generous government start-up capital, so that before long "cheap atomic power could be used to irrigate deserts" and to "air-condition the tropics and the frozen wastes of the Arctic," as one enthusiastic *New York Times* writer put it.

The only trouble was that the original idea remained forever an idea. While we did achieve the air-conditioning of Las Vegas—not to mention a change of temperature in the Arctic—the part about cheap atomic power never really came to pass. Not only did nuclear energy remain stubbornly pricey; the nuclear industry proved spectacularly incompetent. The parade of nuclear power plants built in the United States in the 1970s and '80s resulted in dozens, even scores, of botched projects and billions of dollars in cost overruns. One particularly flagrant example: the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant on Long Island. It took two decades to plan, build, and test, and wound up costing about eighty times its original estimate, which would have been bad enough even if it had been put into service; it wasn't. So bad was the track record of nuclear power in the United States that in 1985 *Forbes* called it the "largest managerial disaster in business history." (To be fair, this was two months before the introduction of New Coke.)

So who paid for all of this bungling? We did. Taxpayers and electricity ratepayers were forced to bail out these foundering projects to the tune of nearly $300 billion in today's dollars. As for reimbursement of funds? The public got nothing. No executives were forced to unhand their bonuses. Even Hank Paulson might have been annoyed.

Such a miserable economic record is the primary reason that no new plants have been constructed in the United States in nearly three decades. Investment prospects for nuclear going forward also look unpromising. In fact, the estimated cost of building a nuclear plant has quadrupled in the last five years to an impressive $12 billion, or nearly the entire GDP of Afghanistan. (That we spend about five times that much each year trying to pacify Afghanistan by force raises some rather awkward strategic questions. But perhaps there's a solution to satisfy everyone: spend billions constructing nuclear power plants in Afghanistan. You heard it here first.) This would make nuclear energy more expensive watt for watt than virtually any other energy source, including renewables like wind power. And that's only if things go swimmingly. The last batch of reactors built on American soil exceeded their initial cost projections by an average of 200 percent.

The shaky financials of nuclear power aren't limited to the United States. England's nuclear power company British Energy was spared from bankruptcy in 2002 only by a generous state bailout. France's mostly state-owned power company Electricité de France (EDF), which oversees a vast archipelago of reactors, has been in such a financial mess that, according to a 2004 report in the *Economist*, factoring in the liabilities on its balance sheet would leave the company "technically insolvent."

But never mind the French and their *chagrins nucléaires*. Let's just have the market decide. The only trouble is that the mere mention of the word "reactor" sends private investors fleeing in terror. Banking giants such as Citigroup and Goldman Sachs are unwilling to sink their funds into nuclear power. Or, it would be more accurate to say, they *are* willing, but under only one condition: the government must shoulder all of the risk.

It is with this understanding in mind that politicians have made their latest proposals. The $54 billion in loan guarantees in Obama's budget would cover up to 100 percent of project debt for new reactors. If the projects go sour, Uncle Sam pays back the money. Which is to say, we pay. (See above, under nuclear power, 1970s and '80s.) And the chances of the projects going sour are pretty high: the Congressional Budget Office has put the odds of default on a nuclear loan guarantee at "well above 50 percent."

So let us pause for a moment to consider. We are being asked to guarantee loans to an industry that generates zero organic enthusiasm in the market, despite having had six decades to get its act together. Let's leave aside that a sixty-year-old should have perhaps moved beyond training wheels. Let's even set aside the likelihood that nuclear power will continue to require our forced beneficence. Let's just think about it in terms of political principle. Is there anything about all this elaborate intervention that bears any semblance to faith in the marketplace?

Nevertheless—this may fail to surprise the reader—Republicans remain enthusiastic. "I applaud the Obama administration and the Department of Energy for moving forward on a [nuclear] loan guarantee agreement," said Senator Murkowski, she of the nay vote on loans to automakers. Senator Richard Shelby, another opponent of the auto bailout, will "continue to strongly advocate for increases in nuclear power." Senator Alexander, who hates picking winners and losers, has decided to make the loser the winner, by leading the charge

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for nuclear loan guarantees. When it comes to certain expenditures, Republicans have no apparent reservations about backing huge loans that private investors wouldn't touch on their own.

Of course, one nonfinancial argument in favor of nuclear energy is that the mountains of radioactive waste leave only a small carbon footprint. But that should resonate only among those concerned about climate change. Many Republicans see the threat of global warming as outright bull—or, as GOP Senator James Inhofe puts it, "the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people." And if that's the case, why not go with an easygoing energy source such as natural gas? Heck, why not coal? We're overflowing with it, it's time tested, it's investor friendly, and it's only one-quarter as expensive as nuclear energy. Coal mines have also produced far better folk songs than nuclear reactors.

Some Republicans sidestep these questions by asserting that it will take an energy smorgasbord—including coal, natural gas, wind, nuclear, and more—to meet our future needs. According to this model, which proponents like John McCain refer to as "all of the above," nuclear power is just one essential part of the mix. But think about it for a minute. If you wanted to secure your house against intruders, and among your choices were a $500 alarm system, a $200 shotgun, and a $3 million hologram that could be projected onto your house to make it look like it was the Eiffel Tower, would you pick "all of the above"? If you answered yes, you might consider working for John McCain.

It should also be noted that if nuclear power violates just about every official Republican principle, it also violates an unofficial one: that of Screw France. Should the United States see a major expansion of nuclear power, one of the top beneficiaries would be Areva, the world's largest builder of nuclear plants, which is mostly owned by the French government. (The French and the Japanese, it should be noted, control virtually the entire nuclear supply chain.) The gruesomeness of this surely needs no elaboration.

So why, despite all these affronts to conservative virtue, does Republican ardor for nuclear energy remain undimmed? Conversations with Republican staffers on the Hill, while pleasant enough, don't really clear up the matter—since the staffers prefer to focus less on ideological explanations and more on policy mechanics.

But we can look to history for some likely answers. During the 1970s and '80s, with the Cold War still coloring all of our politics, nuclear power and nuclear weapons occupied similar symbolic space in the public mind. You tended to either favor both or oppose both. Those who favored both thought of themselves as the adults in the room, which, in the age of the Nuclear Freeze and the No Nukes concerts, made some sense. (If a policy is opposed by David Crosby and Jackson Browne, that's not a bad endorsement of it.) Then, as now, nuclear power owed its appeal partly to what political scientists have termed the "Fuck yeah" factor. It was the energy choice of the hardass, the sort who understands we live in a tough world and doesn't get all worked up over dolphins and Teflon.

Many conservatives also persuaded themselves that green radicals and fussy regulators were to blame for the cost overruns and other woes that hamstrung the nuclear power industry. That mind-set remains. "There's a narrative among Republicans of an advanced technology that's being strangled by groups like Greenpeace and liberals who don't trust it," says Jerry Taylor, an energy policy expert at the Cato Institute who opposes energy subsidies. "The reason there isn't more of a market for nuclear is that environmentalists have rendered nuclear investments excessively risky. That's a narrative that conservatives find fairly natural." Of course, for more than a decade, Washington has been peeling back the red tape that conservatives claimed was hampering the building of nuclear plants, and the licensing process for reactors—one of the main stumbling blocks in the past—has been dramatically streamlined. Even so, building new reactors remains spectacularly risky and expensive.

The GOP and nuclear power are such old friends, like Tarzan and Cheeta, that we forget to reflect on the oddity of the relationship. At least Tarzan and Cheeta had compatible policy priorities, such as defense against crocodiles.

But there's also another plausible explanation that's less forgiving. It's that the Bush years brought about—or at least laid bare—the evaporation of any remaining Republican adherence to "free markets" or "small government," leaving instead a K Street machine devoted primarily to itself. Call it cronyism, call it corporatism, or just call it a mess. And Democrats, to a dispiriting degree, have joined in the fun. The public pays for losses while private industry collects on gains. Money flows from middle-class taxpayers to connected titans—bank executives, mortgage giants, and, yes, moribund energy sectors. The business of nuclear energy has so far proved bloated and boondoggly—watchwords for the sort of industry that only a politician could love. But it's politicians who vote. And love it they do. Even—or, in this case, especially—when they're Republican. WM

T. A. Frank is an Irvine Fellow at the New America Foundation and a consulting editor at the *Washington Monthly*.

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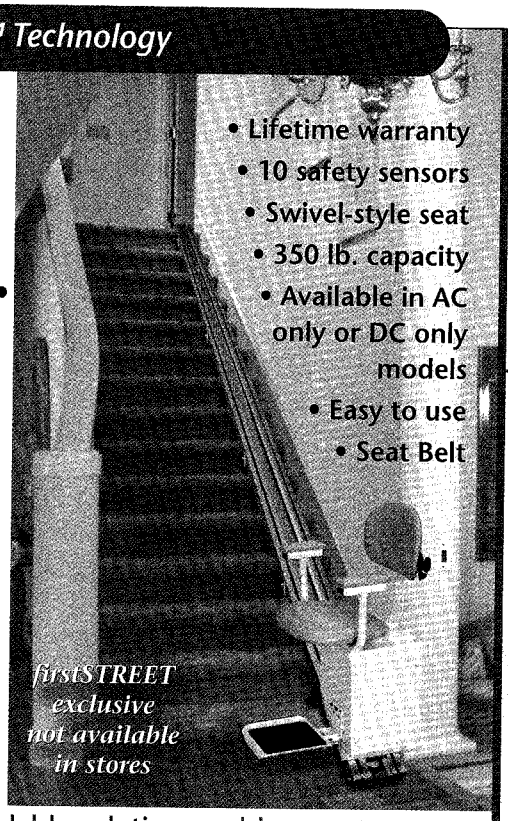
Are you in love with your home, but afraid of your staircase?



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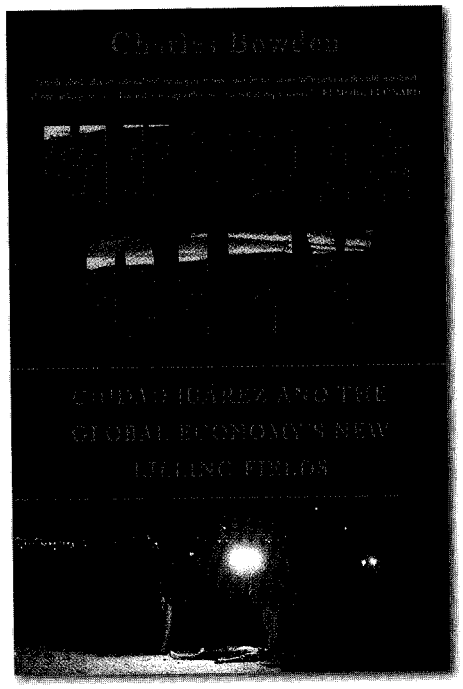
Days of the Dead

How the international drug trade turned a sleepy town on the U.S.-Mexican border into a war zone.

By Andrés Martinez



Murder City: Ciuded Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields

by Charles Bowden
Nation Books, 352 pp.

Even as a child growing up four hours due south, it struck me that few places were as aptly named as El Paso. Not that I was aware of the drugs flowing north and the bundles of cash flowing south, or the fact that this was the place from which Mexico's revolution was launched, the border crossing where a motley band of exiles reentered the country a century ago to march south. Nor did I fully understand the degree to which Ciudad Juárez, El Paso's then-peaceful sister city, had become an extension of U.S. industry, host to dozens of low-cost assembly plants. Parts passed from north to south; finished goods passed from south to north.

For me and my family, "the Pass" was the gateway we passed through to access the First World—the world of gleaming freeways with crisply clear green signs, clean public restrooms, late night with Johnny Carson, aboveboard cops, and all that. Every voyage north entailed a drive that culminated in the dusty sprawl of Juárez, the long wait in bumper-to-bumper traffic that preceded the sight of the Stars and Stripes halfway across the Bridge of the Americas over the less aptly named trickle of the Rio Grande, and all that beckoning tidiness beyond.

The formality of a proper crossing was just that for many people back in the 1970s and '80s, before the border patrol cracked down in and around El Paso. At various places along the city, mom-and-pop operations supplemented the three official points of entry with boat rides across the river for 10 or 20 pesos, maybe 25 if you wanted coffee for the trip. These "*lancheros*" were part of the scenery back then, part of "*el folklor*" of the one great binational city on the border. (Tijuana and San Diego have never been one integrated metropolis in the same way.) Juárez was playfully raffish where El Paso was staid, the place where Americans went to party, eat better, get divorced, or find affordable medical care.

No longer. Juárez today, as detailed in Charles Bowden's haunting chronicle *Murder City*, has become a different type of gateway—a stopover on the way to hell. Juárez has become ground zero in Mexico's drug wars, and one of the world's foremost urban killing fields. A city of some 1.5 million people, less than 2 percent of Mexico's population, Juárez accounted for more than a third of all homicides committed in Mexico last year, more than 2,500. This, despite the deployment of thousands of Mexican army troops by President Felipe Calderon to impose martial law.

If Juárez were a city in Gaza or the West Bank or a border town between Afghanistan and Pakistan, or plopped down in any of the other parts of the world deemed worthy of attention by our foreign policy establishment—as opposed to being on our own southern border—its mayhem would be front and center in our newspapers and on the Sunday talk shows. The neglect is reinforced by the fact that the violence is, for now at least, oddly contained on the southern bank of the Rio Grande. The brazen killing of U.S. consulate employees in broad daylight in March catapulted Juárez into the news for a day or two, but it isn't clear that there will be a widespread targeting of Americans or that the conflict's violence will spill over in any meaningful way to this side of the border. The drug cartels are loathe to take on U.S. authorities, and may be reluctant to wreak havoc in the land where their customers live. El Paso remains among the safest U.S. cities—even the mayor of Juárez lives there.

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Bowden's chronicle of death helps redress the long-standing American neglect toward Mexico's crises that don't directly impact its northern neighbor. The Tucson-based writer spent the better part of 2008 attempting to keep up with the death toll, bearing witness: "I tell people I hate Juárez. I tell people I am mesmerized by Juárez. I tell myself Juárez is a duty." Elsewhere he adds, "You cannot know of the slaughter running along the border and remain the same person."

Bowden is a gifted writer; the book reads like a lyrical ode to arid despair. The literary quality of the writing, and its relentless fatalism, bring to mind Gabriel García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, except in this case it is not the protagonist's death in question, but an entire city's. The oppressive, windswept vibe also brings to mind *No Country for Old Men*, the Oscar-winning movie based on a novel by the El Pasoan writer Cormac McCarthy.

"There is a sound that is everywhere in Juárez," Bowden writes,

> *the skittering of litter down a street by a warehouse of death, the flapping of plastic bags caught on the barbed wire, on fence posts, on iron bars. The city has this skittering and flapping, and all is wrapped in endless waves of dust and plumes of exhaust pouring out the tailpipes of dying buses carrying workers to endless toil.*

Bowden can barely keep track of the killings, let alone explain them. He is exhausted, demoralized, and shamed by the mounting toll—the discovery of mass graves, the massacres in rehab centers, the impunity of the killing. He writes, "Nothing really registers in this place, the city erases not simply lives, but also memory. And those who remember are the most likely of all to be erased."

There are few heroes in *Murder City*, mainly bad guys, accomplices, victims, and a handful of implausible survivors. The cruelty of *sicarios*, the callousness of the authorities who are either on the take or so cowed that they choose to look the other way, and the suffering of the city's population all bring to mind the most haunting line of Nobel laureate Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude*: "For Mexicans, life is about the possibility of"—um—"*chingar o de ser chingado*."

Bowden concludes his book on a helpless note, observing that no one can imagine how the violence will stop, given "the torrent of cash that the army, the police, the government, and the cartels all lust for." He points out that as early as the mid-1990s, before Juárez became a battleground for various warring cartels from different parts of Mexico, the local cartel, then run by Amado Carrillo, was already clearing an estimated $12 billion a year in profit. Plan Merida, the package of U.S. security assistance that Hillary Clinton negotiated in March, amounts to just $300 million annually.

Against a backdrop of such hopelessness, Bowden maintains that redemption can only be attained at the individual level, and even then in rare instances. His examples are exquisite profiles, of a *sicario* who finds Jesus and slips his former employers; a newspaperman who tries to stay out of trouble but has to seek asylum north of the border for offending the army (and is treated horribly in the United States despite his obviously well-grounded fear of prosecution); a pastor who runs a rehab center.

But if Bowden excels as Juárez's chronicler of death—almost its poet laureate—he falls short as a policy analyst or provider of broader context. Granted, Juárez is a hellish place these days, but Bowden is too invested in making a horrible situation seem as bad as possible, an understandable failing but a failing nonetheless. Contra Bowden's portrait of the city, not everyone in Juárez is in on the killing. There are plenty of civil society groups, businesspeople, politicians, and even security units that are clean and trying to do what is right, even if they are currently overwhelmed and outgunned. Bowden's narrative is lacking these folks caught in the crossfire, unless they literally are, as victims. He also paints a distorted picture of a city of addicts—drug addiction rates in Juárez are definitely higher than in other parts of Mexico, but still lower than in major American cities. In painting his hellish portrait, Bowden depicts a poverty born of desperation, but Juárez is not Chiapas. It is far better off than most other regions of Mexico—including plenty of places where people aren't killing each other—and by many measures, living standards in Mexico have risen in recent decades. At one point, the book asserts, in an all-you-need-to-know manner, that well into the 1990s a woman in Mexico could be barred by law from holding a job without her husband's permission. If such an archaic law remained technically on the books, it would have been as relevant to contemporary life as the Virginia state law still on the books today criminalizing cohabitation by unmarried couples.

It's also unfortunate that Bowden indicts Juárez's assembly plants, NAFTA, capitalism, and other economic forces having little to do with the supply and demand for illicit drugs in this country, raising questions about whether the author has a separate agenda compelling him to make a bad situation seem even worse. Maybe there is a lazy assumption on the part of the author and his editors that right-minded readers all should share his distaste for economic liberalization, but I am not sure how the drug war in Juárez would be any different had Mexico embraced Bolivarian socialism. In his pursuit of grand economic explanations, Bowden misses more obvious ones, failing to connect the dots between the outbreak of uncontrollable violence in Juárez in the last few years and the aggressive clampdown on the flow of drugs from Colombia via the Caribbean, and he doesn't explore the links between drug trafficking and human trafficking. Nor does he flesh out the altered power dynamics in Mexico with the advent of greater democratization in 2000. He doesn't speculate about what role the U.S. might play to alleviate the suffering of Mexico, or consider what might have been responsible for the remarkable turnaround of another Latin American city once as synonymous with murder as Juárez has become: Medellin, Colombia.

In fairness, it is only because Mexico doesn't get sufficient attention in the United States that a reader would look to an impressionistic account like *Murder City* to cover all the bases, an expectation we wouldn't have of a similar book on Afghanistan or Iraq. Still, readers less inclined to fatalism and more interested in understanding the broader context of Mexico's drug war will have to look elsewhere. WM

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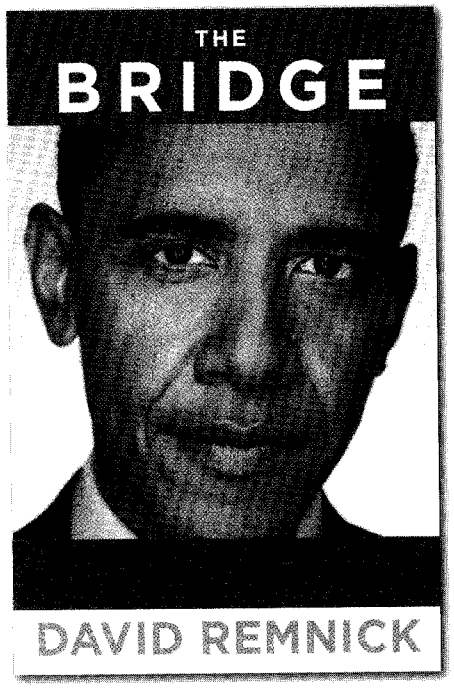
A Bridge Too Far?

Barack Obama's election showed how far Americans had come on the issue of race. His presidency so far shows how much farther we have to go.

By Ed Kilgore



The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama

by David Remnick
Knopf, 672 pp.

David Remnick has taken on an impressively difficult task: retelling a well-known story about an extraordinarily famous contemporary figure, who as it happens has told much of the story in his own words.

In writing a biography focused on Barack Obama's role in the history of American race relations, Remnick re-tracks much of the ground covered by Obama's own *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, not to mention the vast literature on the president since his emergence into the national spotlight in 2004 (some of it by Remnick himself).

Remnick largely meets the challenge he sets out for himself with a lively and enjoyable biography that is likely to remain definitive if not always pathbreaking. Moreover, his tight frame on Obama as a racial pioneer helps provide a sound platform for understanding the racial dimension of Obama's young presidency, which is necessarily beyond the scope of this book.

Among its many merits, *The Bridge* provides readers with an eloquently rendered history of crucial moments in the civil rights struggle (dating back to slavery times), and a continuing commentary by many of its living leaders on the significance of Obama's rise to the presidency. Most notably, John Lewis gave Remnick the title of his book when he said on the eve of the forty-fourth president's inauguration, "Barack Obama is what comes at the end of that bridge in Selma."

Lewis's contention is debated by African American political figures—and, indirectly, by Obama himself—throughout much of the book, though by the time of Obama's election, all but a few bitter-enders seem to have been swept up in the excitement. Many appear to echo the attitude of African American voters in the early primaries of 2008, whose ambivalence about the first viable black presidential candidate was largely quelled by his success in attracting white support.

The central metaphor for Obama's rise in Remnick's account is the succession of Moses by Joshua as leader of the Hebrew people. Obama exemplified the "Joshua Generation"—the title of a Remnick essay published in the *New Yorker* shortly after Obama's election, which presents most of *The Bridge*'s central themes in miniature. Like Moses, the pioneers of the civil rights struggle couldn't reach the promised land, but their successor—half white, born and raised in a strange and privileged milieu, a politician, not a prophet, and a man who bleached the rhetorical cadences and communal memories of the African American struggle into American universalism—could and did.

Obama's erratic progress toward this omega point of embodying a fusion of the African American and American "stories" is largely the plot of *Dreams from My Father*, which Remnick fact-checks and contextualizes for roughly half of his own book. If Remnick finds omissions and exaggerations in Obama's account, he generally confirms its authenticity. And it's significant that Remnick considers Obama's struggle with his racial identity essentially complete (though perhaps reaching its culmination in his subsequent marriage to the exceptionally well-grounded Michelle Robinson), and his rise to power well under way, by the

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time the young man penned a deal to write *Dreams*, after becoming a minor national celebrity upon his selection as editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. At this relatively tender age, Obama had already abundantly exhibited the qualities that made him an exemplar to African Americans and an enormously appealing personality to his white peers and mentors, including and even particularly those with conservative views on the law and politics. Once he fully came to grips with the legacy left him by the prophets of the African American struggle, his own ability to "stand on the shoulders of giants" and transcend that legacy became clear and natural to him.

One of Remnick's most insightful passages involves Obama's speech on the night of the 2008 Iowa caucuses, when he was introduced to the country as, incredibly, the instant front-runner for the Democratic nomination for president:

> *An astonishing set of rhetoric gestures: Obama called on the familiar cadences and syntax of the black church, echoing Jesse Jackson's more overt lines: "Hands that picked cotton can now pick presidents: Our time has come!" He gestured toward what everyone was thinking about—the launching of a campaign that could lead to the first African-American President. Jon Favreau, Obama's speechwriter, said that the two of them were immersed in all of King's rhetoric, in the two Lincoln inaugurals, and in Robert Kennedy's 1968 campaign speeches. The opening of the Iowa speech—"they said this day would never come"—echoed King, but it was not explicitly racial; it was a way of intensifying a universalist purpose with a specific, historical ring. "I knew that it would have multiple meanings to multiple people," Favreau said.*

Obama's intelligence and urbanity reassured some white Americans that he was "post-racial," but convinced others that he was the avatar of a coalition of white professional elites and a dependent black underclass, all bent on looting the productive middle class.

This Joshua had to find Moses before finding himself as Joshua. And this Joshua knew how to redeploy the prophetic words of Moses in a tongue that all ears could hear.

If Remnick is artful in weaving the history of the civil rights struggle into his account of Obama's rise, he is more straightforward in explaining the less familiar territory of Chicago's African American and progressive politics. The ghost of Mayor Harold Washington—the brilliant conqueror of the Daley machine whose sudden death in office represented a U-turn from triumph and tragedy for an entire generation of Chicago reformers—haunts his account as it apparently haunted Obama's own aspirations from his first days in the city as a novice community organizer on the South Side.

To veterans of the Washington campaign and its antecedents and aftermath, Obama was a parvenu when he first ran for office in 1996 after returning to Chicago as a young attorney and law professor; his community organizing experience was viewed as little more than an internship in the civic life of the community. He had, however, shown an extraordinary flair for networking and making influential friends, preparing him well for the opportunity that suddenly opened up when his state senator, Alice Palmer, decided to run in a special election for a rare open congressional seat. He managed to secure Palmer's tacit backing to succeed her—conveyed in a small gathering hosted by Palmer's ex-radical friends William Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn (an event that would loom large in attacks on Obama in 2008). But when Palmer was crushed by Jesse Jackson Jr. in the congressional contest and reconsidered her decision to retire from the state senate, Obama refused to withdraw, and ultimately relied on a successful challenge to her ballot petitions to thwart her comeback. This act struck many political activists in Chicago as epitomizing Obama's refusal to pay his dues, and, as Remnick explains, contributed to his humiliating defeat by Congressman Bobby Rush in 2000, which nearly ended his political career.

Remnick effectively describes Obama's boredom and frustration in the state legislature, but also his good luck: had Obama succeeded in representing the South Side in Congress—or following Harold Washington's path to the mayor's office—his mercurial climb in national politics, and likely his biracial appeal, would never have happened. Moreover, his unlikely bid for the U.S. Senate in 2004 (after he convinced Michelle that this would be his last campaign if he lost) was built on the patronage of the state senate president, Emil Jones—an African American—who not only helped make Obama viable, but ensured he would enjoy exceptional opportunities to sponsor popular legislation once he had decided to run statewide.

It's at this point in his career, and in Remnick's book, that Obama's story becomes part of national political lore and very well-trod ground. But in his account of Obama's successful U.S. Senate race, Remnick is careful to demur somewhat from the Barack the Lucky legend, according to which his main Democratic and Republican rivals magically vanished by self-destruction. (Obama had in fact pulled ahead of both of them before damaging material from their divorce papers became public.)

And even the "break" that made Obama an overnight national phenomenon—his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention—is explained as more hard work than blind luck. Obama lobbied for the speaking spot, sending clips of his campaign appearances to the Kerry team. He spent weeks writing and honing the speech (as always, he was his own best speechwriter), which was essentially a version of the stock speech he had been delivering on the Senate campaign trail. After constant rehearsals, he delivered, and the rest, as the cliché goes, was history, as he filled a momentary niche in American politics that seemed almost divinely predestined by his background.

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Remnick's book essentially ends with the inauguration. In a brief epilogue, the author notes a sense of disappointment on "the left" with Obama's early presidency, and also suggests there's been a hint of racial animosity in the Tea Party movement. He even says, "One year after the 2008 election it was fair to wonder whether the most profound moment of the Obama era would be its first."

This sentiment would certainly be consistent with the book's overall depiction of Obama as a transitional figure in American history—as "the bridge." But I'm probably not the only reader who wonders if the events of the last fourteen months cast some doubt on the proposition that the resistance at the end of the Edmund Pettus Bridge has fully been overcome.

Remnick's account of the 2008 general election discusses the bitterness and desperation of the McCain campaign, with its conviction that the media was too invested in the drama of Obama's success to cover the campaign fairly. And he devotes some attention to the efforts of McCain allies to comb through Obama's complicated life to find evidence that he was "an alien figure with a shadowy background and pernicious intentions," with a particular focus on Obama's cosmopolitanism, his relationship with Jeremiah Wright, and his far less intimate but no less controversial connection with William Ayers. Remnick does not, however, explore the more directly racial undertones of viral conservative efforts (eventually echoed by the McCain campaign in its most desperate hours) to create a master narrative in which Obama's old community organizing associates in the inner-city activist group ACORN had touched off the housing crisis and the financial meltdown by helping unqualified poor and minority families obtain mortgages they could not or would not pay, and was now seeking "socialist" policies to indemnify their shiftless constituency by engaging in massive voter fraud to elect Obama.

Crazy as it was, this narrative continued to spread after election day, and became integral to the lurid fears at the heart of the Tea Party movement, beginning with Rick Santelli's televised "rant" against mortgage relief. By late 2009, as anti-Obama sentiment spread among older white Americans, polls were showing that near majorities of both Republicans and Tea Party activists subscribed to the theory that "ACORN stole the election for Obama." When a crude stunt entrapped one ACORN office into counseling a phony "pimp" on how to avoid taxes, the conservative chattering classes reacted as though a conspiracy of vast dimensions had been exposed. (Congress subsequently, and perhaps unconstitutionally, disqualified ACORN from receiving federal funds for any of its activities, and the national organization folded.)

Given the complexion of virtually everyone connected with ACORN, and its inner-city focus, it is laughable to suggest there was not a racial element to this conservative preoccupation, which brought back old stereotypes of "welfare queens" voting to redistribute the assets of hardworking (white) Americans via taxation and government relief. Moreover, Obama's exceptional intelligence and urbanity, which had reassured some white Americans that he was in some sense "postracial," convinced others that he was the biracial avatar of a vicious coalition of privileged white professional elites and their dependent black underclass clientele, all bent on looting the productive middle class—a coalition demonized by right-wing populist demagogues dating back to Spiro Agnew and George Wallace.

It is possible that any Democratic president inheriting a financial collapse, a deep recession, two wars, and simmering culture wars would have faced the same radicalized conservative opposition determined to disassociate itself from George W. Bush (now deemed insufficiently conservative after years of conservative adulation). But no matter how much today's conservatives rage at any suggestion of even a hint of racism, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the ever-intensifying campaign to depict the president as the conscious enemy of every great national tradition, up to and including the Constitution and liberty itself, owes a great deal to anxiety about his symbolic victory over an older, whiter America. It is no accident that the category of voters who most resisted his appeal in 2008—white seniors—is the hotbed of resistance to his agenda as president.

Arguably, then, we are now experiencing a new stage in the tangled history of race relations in America, in which it's not clear whether Obama is "the bridge" on the road to a postracial society or just another leader seeking to cross that bridge: not a Moses, but not quite a Joshua, either. Part of the president's current political dilemma, though, is that so many Americans—particularly African Americans and younger voters—who were so proud to support him in 2008 do not seem to feel a sense of urgency about his success in office, the prospects of his party in November, or his reelection in 2012. By contrast, many of his opponents clearly have not accepted his election as an irreversible fact.

Fairly or not, the significance of Barack Obama's achievement in becoming the first African American president will likely be determined by his ability to become a truly successful *African American president.*

Ultimately, Barack Obama, the calm, self-assured politician whom so many viewed as the heir of prophets and the harbinger of a postracial, post–culture war politics, may now have to depend on the politician's skills of intelligently wrought policies, well-crafted strategies and tactics, and the mistakes of his opponents. But fairly or not, the significance of his achievement in becoming the first African American president will likely be determined by his ability to become the first *successful* African American president. The enactment of health care reform legislation, an enormous accomplishment won at an enormous political cost, is the first landmark on that bridge. David Remnick should already be planning a sequel. WM

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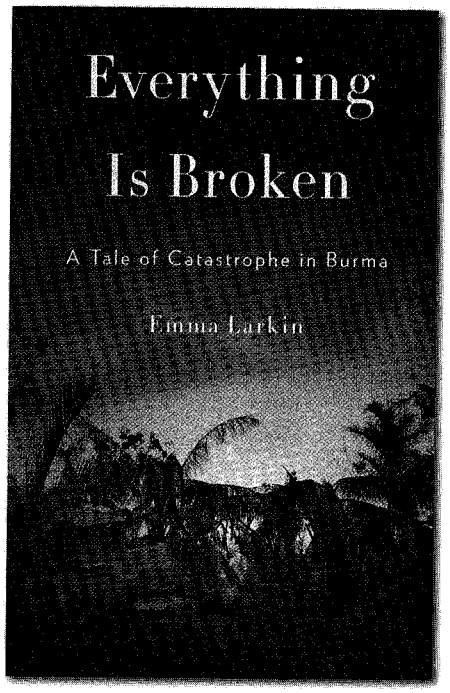
Failing State



Everything Is Broken: A Tale of Catastrophe in Burma

By Emma Larkin
The Penguin Press, 288 pp.

Burma is dangerously close to collapse, an event that could throw much of South and Southeast Asia into turmoil. A whole new strategy from Washington is called for.

By Joshua Kurlantzick

Normally, the Kokang region of northern Burma, home to ethnic Kokang, doesn't exactly hum with activity. Small traders sell apples from China out of carts on the side of the road; the area's capital, Laogai, is a seedy town with open-air markets and several shabby casinos catering to local tourists. But last August, the region suddenly came alive. The Burmese military launched a wave of attacks against a Kokang insurgent group, and the Kokang fought back, joined by other ethnic armies in the region. Terrified, as many as 30,000 people fled the lawless area, with many crossing the border into China. And Beijing clearly wasn't happy. "We warned [the Burmese government] not to push the Kokang too hard," says one Chinese official. "They just didn't listen to us."

The fighting in Kokang country was hardly unique. Across northern and eastern Burma, where the military junta exercises minimal control and insurgents run wild, tenuous ceasefires between the regime and ethnic-minority militias are breaking down. The resulting clashes are aggravating the nation's already grave humanitarian crisis, spawned by a mix of vicious army repression of civilians and constant fighting between the military and ethnic insurgents. The Thailand-based Burma Border Coalition estimates that there are already more than 450,000 internally displaced people in one eastern region of Burma alone, and many of them are literally starving to death. Overall, more than a million Burmese have been uprooted—one of the largest groups of internally displaced people in the world. Many refugees spend their time constantly on the run, fleeing one army offensive after the next and struggling to keep their children alive as they forage through the jungle, searching for edible plants. With virtually no medical care in much of the country, children and even healthy adults die of diseases easily curable just across the border in Thailand, while rampant prostitution and widespread rape by soldiers spread virulent strains of HIV among the refugees. And if fighting picks up again, hundreds of thousands more will likely be forced into itinerant misery.

The spiraling conflicts and deluge of desperate refugees threaten to push large parts of the country—already among the poorest in the world—into collapse. Largely unpoliced northeastern Burma already has developed into one of the world's narcotrafficking capitals, while arms from lawless parts of the country flow across the border into Bangladesh and India, fueling insurgencies in those countries.

Unfortunately, this looming chaos has gone largely unnoticed outside Burma's borders. For nearly two decades, most Western nations have viewed Burma (or Myanmar, as it is officially named) through a simple, black-and-white prism: the country is engaged in a political standoff between the brutal ruling junta and the democratic opposition led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party won Burma's last free election in 1990 but was prevented by the military from ever assuming office. This simplistic view has badly distorted policy toward Burma, as it leaves only two policy options: sanction Burma, which the U.S. has done since 1997; or engage with the nasty regime, as the Obama administration has done, sending the highest-level American mission to the country

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since the mid-1990s. But as shown by the Kokang crisis, and by *Everything Is Broken*, Emma Larkin's thoughtful and expertly reported book about the aftermath of a devastating cyclone that hit the country in April 2008, Burma now is more than a political conflict between two actors—it is an important country facing a total breakdown. And the humanitarian crisis, a key contributor to the nation's volatility, must be addressed whether or not the political stalemate is resolved anytime soon.

It won't be easy. To keep the crisis in check, Washington, and its partners in Asia—like Thailand, Singapore, India, and China, Burma's key supporter—must reorient their policy to stop the country from imploding while simultaneously keeping up the pressure on the Burmese junta, a difficult balancing act. But in the long run, tackling the looming humanitarian disaster makes sense not only for purely altruistic reasons, but for hard, strategic reasons as well. By addressing the problem head on, the U.S. would help prevent a crisis that could destabilize the entire region. Even more important, Washington would show its Asian partners—who have been angry for years that Burma's problems spill into their countries while the U.S. does nothing—that Washington has heard them and is responding to their complaints.

That Burma faces a massive humanitarian crisis would have shocked observers of the country in the 1950s and early '60s. At that time, Burma possessed vast natural resources, an educated middle class, a solid bureaucratic system left by the British, and a vibrant democracy that had developed after independence in 1948, including freewheeling publications and noisy political debate. Development experts considered Burma one of the best chances for high growth in Asia; wealthy Thais flew from Bangkok to Rangoon, Burma's largest city, to stock up on luxury goods.

The situation today could not be more different. Cyclone Nargis, which killed some 130,000 people, left behind utter devastation in the Irrawaddy Delta. Large swaths of the region were flattened, the simple thatch homes swept away and their inhabitants drowned. Mothers grasped small children in their arms until the cyclone's intense winds pulled the babies away; fishermen held on to tiny boats until the storm capsized them. Stunned survivors, often with no clothes on their bodies, wandered the delta hunting for rotten rice to eat and medicines to treat gaping wounds and festering infections.

But as Larkin—a Burmese speaker and one of the few foreign writers to obtain sustained access to Burma after the storm—clearly illustrates, even before the cyclone the country barely functioned. Once a thriving metropolis, Rangoon now resembles a decaying African city. Electricity flickers on and off, and massive potholes make even short drives an adventure. Though as recently as the late 1990s I rarely saw homeless people in the city, today entire homeless families camp out on patches of grass near the waterfront and train tracks. A nearly worthless currency and an antiquated and corrupt banking system have led to numerous bank runs, with the panics causing spikes in the prices of staple goods. The World Health Organization ranks Burma's health care system the second worst in the world, surpassing only that of Sierra Leone. Educated Burmese who can get out, do, fleeing to Singapore or Thailand or the West. Some 30 percent of Burmese children under five go hungry, Larkin notes, in a country that once stood among the world's leading rice producers.

Once a thriving metropolis, Rangoon now resembles a decaying African city. As recently as the late 1990s I rarely saw homeless people in the city. Today entire homeless families camp out on patches of grass near the waterfront and train tracks.

Burma certainly faces serious obstacles to development. Its ethnic diversity naturally proves combustible, and as prominent Burma historian Thant Myint-U notes, after gaining independence from Britain, Burma's government faced civil conflicts in many parts of the country—wars that never really died out, creating the seeds for the numerous ethnic-minority armies still operating in Burma. Yet these apologists fail to note that many other former colonies faced obstacles similar to Burma's and still managed to thrive. Malaysia is split between ethnic Malays, Chinese, and Indians, and was rocked by race riots and a communist insurgency in its early years; today, its per capita GDP of $14,500 is more than ten times that of Burma. Indeed, as Larkin clearly shows, the Burmese military regime, which first took power from the democratic government in 1962, bears most of the responsibility for the country's impoverishment. After twenty-six disastrous years of authoritarian socialist isolation, between 1962 and 1988, the military rulers embraced capitalism, but unlike China or Vietnam the regime did not allow the benefits of economic opening to trickle down to average people. Instead, the regime hoarded the profits from Burma's sizable petroleum deposits and stored the money in offshore banks. This left most of the population with nothing and created a parallel social welfare system, including hospitals and schools, just for the military. In 2006, the junta took the parallel system one step further, moving the capital from Rangoon to Naypyidaw, a purpose-built new fortress town in the middle of the country where the army's elites can live bunkered away from average Burmese and avoid any possibility of public protest. There, junta leaders live opulent existences; among other things, Larkin describes a lavishly ostentatious wedding for the regime leader's daughter at which the bride wore a treasure trove of diamonds around her neck.

Indeed, Burma's military now competes with the regimes in Sudan and North Korea for the dishonor of worst government on earth. Since the junta annulled the election in 1990, human rights organizations have documented countless atrocities. In eastern Burma, for instance, the army reg-

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ularly attacks villagers, burning down their towns, raping the women, and cutting off body parts—ears, eyes, penises—before killing the men. Elsewhere, the military has perpetrated large-scale forced labor. The junta leader, Senior General Than Shwe, a dour, jowly, and xenophobic ruler, seems like he answered a casting call for a villain. Although in the early days of military rule the army still enjoyed some public support, today the Burmese population clearly despises its rulers. When monks marched through the streets of Rangoon in September 2007's "Saffron Revolution," they drew some 100,000 protestors, though the military eventually cleared the streets with a brutal crackdown, showing that it did not have scruples even about killing monks, the most respected members of Burmese society. Arriving in Burma shortly after the Saffron crackdown, Larkin found a society in despair so deep that even monks could offer no solace. "It was once said that a monk could fan his robes across a criminal and protect the wrongdoer from the wrath of a king," Larkin writes. "Now, the monasteries were unable to offer any kind of sanctuary."

This thuggery—and the lack of American business in Burma—has made it easy for Washington to all but wash its hands of the country, with American officials who could never take such a hard line with China or Russia blasting the Burmese junta and coming off as tough on human rights abuses. In addition to comprehensive sanctions forbidding U.S. companies from launching new business in Burma, Washington and most other major donors have provided minimal aid to the country in recent years. In next-door Laos, run by a regime less cartoonishly evil but just as repressive, foreign donors, including the United States, spend $49 per person, according to the United Nations Development Program; in Burma, as Larkin notes, donors spend just $2.80 per person, though the country has vast needs.

The aid disparity with Laos only highlights how Burma became the great exception in U.S. policy. With nearly every other country, Washington has proved willing to provide substantial humanitarian assistance in times of dire crisis, no matter how terrible the regime in power. Some observers argue that delivering aid to Burma is uniquely complicated because of the junta's history of rejecting foreign assistance, and to some degree this is true. Than Shwe's regime clearly worries that allowing in too much aid could undermine its control. After Cyclone Nargis, it initially rejected virtually all foreign aid, a fact that got enormous play in the Western media. But, as Larkin found, it did eventually permit humanitarian organizations to set up substantial operations, particularly after other Asian countries stepped in and served as brokers between the junta and Western aid groups, proving that the regime's resistance to aid is not absolute. Another common argument against sending aid to Burma is that it will only end up in the hands of the junta. Most aid workers I've met in Burma agree that some of the assistance is indeed skimmed off by regime-connected officials and businesspeople, who distribute it to their allies or even sell it. But the same could be said about many nasty countries where the U.S. provides humanitarian aid, like Laos, a darling of aid organizations, or even North Korea, where regime insiders reportedly sell donated food on the black market and the government keeps a far tighter rein on the movements of foreign workers than in Burma. Despite these obstacles, and the fact that Pyongyang allegedly runs a series of gulags worse even than Burma's horrid prisons, the U.S. has been one of the largest donors of food aid to North Korea, helping alleviate famine. Even the George W. Bush administration, full of conservatives wary of any interaction with Pyongyang—Bush himself reportedly called the North Korean leader a "pygmy" and went so far as to say, "I loathe Kim Jong Il"—provided food aid to the country.

Death warmed over: Human remains in the Burmese village of Tha Ma Thukha, which was decimated by Cyclone Nargis in 2008.

Getty Images

For decades, the U.S., other Western nations, and even local powers like Chi-

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na could get away with essentially ignoring Burma's problems. Average Burmese suffered horribly, but their pain was, for the most part, contained within the country. Thailand took the brunt of refugees, and many Thai companies actually welcomed fleeing Burmese, since they provided cheap, hardworking labor. Thousands of miles away, Washington was hardly affected by Burma's misery, and Suu Kyi and other democratic leaders took a skeptical view of aid, insisting that it could potentially keep the regime in power longer. Given this argument, American officials felt they had license to reject increasing assistance to the country. Some prominent aid organizations, like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, pulled out of the country entirely.

But while Burma has been suffering for some time, the country's pain now is spiraling into all-out collapse. Seeking to gain the upper hand as it prepares for state-managed national elections this year, the junta wants to take over swaths of the north and east that are now controlled by the numerous ethnic-minority armies with tens of thousands of well-armed fighters. A major conflagration could easily erupt in the area.

As fighting escalates, the nation's already dismal refugee crisis could worsen rapidly, with hunger, disease, and refugee flows spiraling out of control. A large share of Burma's million-plus internally displaced people could also flee the country, causing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flood into Thailand and China. As they move, the refugees, and soldiers engaged in rape and sex with prostitutes, spread HIV and other deadly diseases. Doctors Without Borders estimates that the country already has the worst HIV crisis in Asia. And as Burma's refugee crisis worsens, so too will the HIV emergency, threatening the health of India, China, and Thailand. Parts of northeastern India along the Burmese border now face record numbers of HIV cases because of the disease spreading from Burma. Burma also appears to be a breeding ground for more dangerous forms of the virus. According to Laurie Garrett of the Council on Foreign Relations, Burma's massive internal migration causes diverse strains of the disease to mix, which has helped to spawn the deadliest forms of HIV in the region.

The flaring violence and burgeoning humanitarian catastrophe have made it harder for the U.S. and other major powers to ignore Burma. Possibly realizing that the country cannot be defined solely by a political struggle when the humanitarian crisis is spiraling out of control, Suu Kyi has publicly offered to work with Than Shwe to help get sanctions against Burma lifted.

There are also the broader consequences to weigh. The armed conflicts and the deluge of desperate refugees are threatening to spawn chaos and lawlessness on Burma's borders, which could spread instability into eastern India, a region already wracked by its own ethnic and class-based insurgent warfare. This would give greater freedom to the narcotraffickers—one of Burma's ethnic-minority forces, the United Wa State Army, already has transformed itself into one of the most powerful drug traffickers in the world. The situation would also create large ungoverned regions, similar to Somalia or Yemen, which could become a nexus for criminals and terrorists.

More importantly, a political vacuum in parts of Burma could allow the spread of weapons of mass destruction. For years, some Burma observers have suspected that, in order to strengthen its position internationally, the regime was trying to launch a nuclear program. Originally, this suggestion was laughed off by senior American officials, but over the past two years the international community has grown concerned that the junta may indeed have nuclear ambitions (though nuclear experts doubt it has anywhere near the capabilities it needs to actually build a bomb). A comprehensive study released in January by the Institute for Science and International Security, a respected nonprofit that conducts research on science and policy, documents a web of worrying new military links between Burma and North Korea and suspicious construction of potential nuclear facilities in Burma. "No one can ignore the possibility of significant North Korean nuclear assistance to this enigmatic military regime," the report concludes. "Burma is seeking abroad a large quantity of top-notch highly sophisticated goods with potential missile and nuclear uses."

The regime's potential nuclear ambitions are, perhaps, the most important reason to prevent Burma from imploding. In a time of chaos, this nuclear technology easily could escape the country and find its way into dangerous hands.

Given everything that's at stake, the United States must begin viewing Burma as a potential failed state and preparing for the consequences. As a first step, Washington should launch a substantial new humanitarian assistance program for Burma, not only because the Burmese people desperately need assistance—a fact that could be said about citizens of the Congo, or Burkina Faso, or many other poor countries ignored by the U.S.—but also because it could help stem the slide toward chaos. This is not to say that humanitarian aid alone will fix all the woes that have led to Burma's instability; handing out rice and cooking oil won't necessarily persuade rebel factions to put down arms or stop the regime from brutalizing its people. But by establishing a humanitarian operation in collaboration with Burma's neighbors, the U.S. will begin to build the institutional infrastructure it needs to respond should the situation take a sudden turn for the worse. A joint humanitarian effort is also a critical first step to forging a coordinated Burma policy so we can effectively avert a full-blown catastrophe—

"It was once said that a monk could fan his robes across a criminal and protect the wrongdoer from the wrath of a king," Larkin writes. "Now, the monasteries were unable to offer any kind of sanctuary."

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or at least prevent turmoil from spreading across the region.

Perhaps more importantly, Burma could become a perfect opportunity for real U.S.-China cooperation in crisis management. For this reason alone, it makes strategic sense for Washington to step up its aid to Burma, since the U.S.-China relationship will determine much of what happens around the world in the coming decades. As China grows into a global power, Washington increasingly has pressured Beijing to shoulder greater responsibility for managing crises, but from Iran to North Korea to Afghanistan the Chinese government consistently has disappointed, refusing to join international efforts to pressure rogue regimes, add troops to multinational missions like in Afghanistan, or accept refugees from places like North Korea.

Burma is different. Unlike Iran or North Korea or Sudan, China has only modest economic and strategic interests in Burma. And Chinese officials, furious about the drugs, guns, and diseases flowing from Burma into southwestern China, have issued unusually blunt public criticisms of the junta for failing to stop narcotrafficking and conflict in ethnic-minority areas. "You might not see us publicly dropping the noninterference [in other countries' affairs] policy, but that doesn't mean we are going to stand by on Burma," one Chinese diplomat who closely follows Burma told me. "And we realize that our relations with them hurts China's image. There's a reason Hu Jintao has never made a visit to Burma; we don't want to see news coverage of him there."

What's more, unlike in some other regions of the world, Washington can afford to let Beijing take the lead on dealing with Burma. In fact, it has done so already. In 2007, when then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Eric John wanted to set up a meeting with senior Burmese officials, he turned to China as the broker and eventually held talks with the Burmese in Beijing. By allowing Beijing to lead, the U.S. will demonstrate, both to China and to other countries in the region, that Washington can play a role in a future multilateral Asia. This would provide critical strategic benefits for the United States: by demonstrating that America is adapting to Asia's changing realities, the U.S. shows that it will remain a player in Asia for the long haul.

It is possible to aid the Burmese people and to remain critical of the junta at the same time. Washington achieves this balance with North Korea, offering food aid while simultaneously appointing a special envoy for human rights to investigate and publicize the country's abuses.

So what should a new American policy toward Burma look like? First, it should avoid connecting aid to the internal political situation. This would simultaneously reassure the regime, which is always worried that aid is somehow designed to weaken its hold on power; show average Burmese that America is committed to the country for the long term; and put the United States more in line with its friends in Asia, who long have advocated divorcing aid from Burmese politics. It should also bring per capita aid levels to Burma up to regional levels, if not higher. In addition, the new aid operation should be coordinated closely with China, and, at least initially, focus on areas of need that could prevent the country from collapsing, such as working with Burmese farmers to improve agricultural productivity.

Of course, Washington and its partners must insist as much as possible upon accountability and transparency for this assistance. In some areas, the aid could be delivered into Burma from Thailand, thereby bypassing the regime in Naypyidaw and making it easier to ensure that the money is spent well; a network of NGOs focused on Burma already exists along the Thai border.

Just because it increases aid to Burma does not mean the United States should ignore the regime's horrendous abuses. Nor should the U.S. assume that, just because the regime accepts aid, it has somehow moderated its brutality or become more open to political compromise with Suu Kyi and her party. In fact, most signs suggest the regime has little interest in cooperation with Suu Kyi—it recently barred her from competing in the upcoming national elections, which are all but guaranteed to be stage-managed by the regime. It is possible, however, to aid the Burmese people and to remain critical of the junta at the same time. Washington achieves this balance with North Korea, offering food aid while simultaneously appointing a special envoy for human rights to investigate and publicize the country's abuses. It can do this in Burma by ramping up aid while continuing to insist that real American diplomatic recognition of Burma—returning an ambassador to the country, ending sanctions, no longer treating Burma like an international pariah—be contingent on an end to the political stalemate, peace in the ethnic-minority regions, and truly free elections.

And what if the Burmese junta, which has shown it cares little for its people's welfare, simply rejects any American assistance? It's certainly possible. In that case, Washington at least will be able to point out to China and other Asian partners that, rather than leaving the Burmese crisis in their laps, the U.S. tried to help prevent chaos.

During the first year of the Obama administration, the White House has worked hard to convince its partners across the Pacific that it would not ignore them, as George W. Bush often had in favor of the Middle East. "The United States is back in Southeast Asia," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in a speech in Thailand last summer. By reimagining its Burma policy, Washington would show it really has returned. WM

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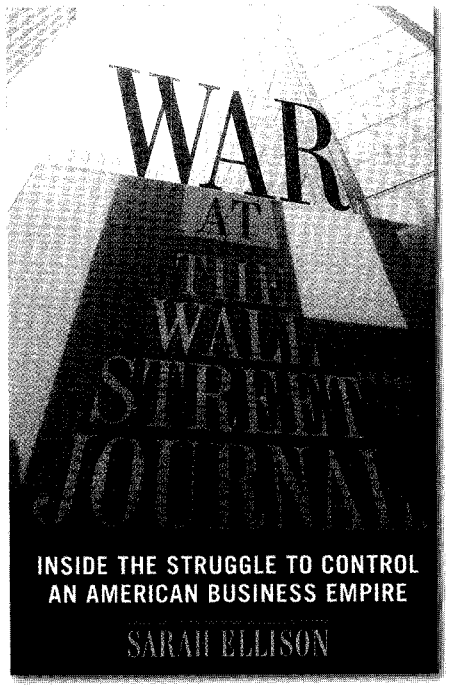
The A-hed and the A-hole

Did Rupert Murdoch's takeover of the *Wall Street Journal* ruin a once-great paper, or save it from itself?

By Justin Peters



War at the Wall Street Journal: Inside the Struggle to Control an American Business Empire

by Sarah Ellison
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 304 pp.

On July 31, 2007, the barbarians finally made it over the gate. On that day, media titan Rupert Murdoch sealed a $5.6 billion deal to buy Dow Jones, parent company of the *Wall Street Journal*. For decades, the *Journal* had styled itself the smartest daily in the country, with its intelligent reporting, trenchant analysis, and A-heds—the long, thoughtful feature stories that ran perpendicular to the day's news. Now, it was owned by the man who gave the world Sean Hannity, the modern *New York Post*, and *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*. Paradise, as they say, had been lost.

Or, at least, that's the impression you get from *War at the Wall Street Journal*, Sarah Ellison's account of the paper's acquisition by Murdoch's News Corp. A former *WSJ* reporter, Ellison covered the sale of the paper for the paper, and she knows her subject well. Her "tick-tock" reporting on the maneuverings that led to the sale is comprehensive and credible, and will likely be welcomed by those who care about the business of news. Her assessment of the transaction's aftermath, however, is somewhat less satisfying.

The *Wall Street Journal* was first published in 1889 as a straightforward business paper; in the 1940s and '50s, under editor Barney Kilgore, it remade itself into a national daily that could legitimately argue that it was "the best damn paper in the country." Like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, its rivals for that designation, the *Journal* was family owned. But unlike the Sulzbergers or the Grahams, the Bancrofts were not active in the paper's day-to-day operations. Rather, they pursued a strategy of "benign neglect," content to enjoy their steady stock income and let the professionals run the business.

Then, in the 2000s, the stock price started dropping—by 44 percent in five years—and the Bancrofts' neglect began to seem somewhat less benign. Longtime CEO Peter Kann retired, and Murdoch, who had long coveted the *Journal*, sensed an opportunity. When he came calling in March 2007, offering $60 per share—a $25 premium over the market price at the time—the family showed some token resistance, but the outcome was never really in doubt. The Bancrofts' ultimate attitude to the Murdoch incursion was emblematized by board member Chris Bancroft, who, wearing a baseball cap that read "Bite Me," spoke against the sale and then proceeded to vote his trustee shares in favor of it. They might not have liked Murdoch, but they had absolutely no problem with Murdoch's money.

It's only a slight exaggeration to say that there are no likable characters in the book. The members of the Bancroft family present the world's best argument for a vigorous estate tax. They are caricatures of the idle rich, alternately ineffectual and petulant, ignorant on matters of both journalism and business. (Ellison writes that

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a couple of anti-Murdoch Bancrofts offered to buy out those relatives who wanted to sell, only to rescind the offer after realizing they had no idea how to actually broker such a deal.)

The peons don't fare much better. The *Journal* reporters and editors seem complacent, while the corporate types who presided over the deal seem small-minded and callow, singularly unfit to decide the fate of a newspaper of national importance; new Dow Jones CEO Richard Zannino, who came from the apparel manufacturer Liz Claiborne, seemed not to recognize any discernable difference between selling women's clothing and selling journalism. ("One of his big critiques of the *Journal*," writes Ellison, "was that it lacked positive stories about successful CEOs and their companies.")

In the years before its sale to News Corp, the Journal *was often flaccid and dull, its staffers so pleased with themselves for being a step behind the news cycle that they didn't even notice they missed the biggest story of their time.*

In fact, a case could be made that the most sympathetic character here is Murdoch. At times, he seems a stereotypical comic book villain—crass and artless, betraying everyone in his life as a matter of course in his joyless grasps for money and power. But whatever else bad that can be said about him, Murdoch exists in the real world, unlike nearly everybody else in the book. As Ellison puts it, the Bancrofts' *Journal* "had seemed beyond time's changes, newsstand appeal, and even questions of readability." Murdoch alone seems to recognize that newspapers are supposed to be read by actual people, and most of his changes were designed with that in mind. He wanted color instead of grayscale; photographs instead of hedcuts; short ledes instead of "stories with the gestation of a llama"; and actual news reporting instead of clunky analysis. He didn't want the *Journal* to be anybody's second read. "We're going to build a fucking great paper and I do not give a fuck what New York or the media has to say about it!" he exclaimed soon after closing on the purchase. "We'll build the world's best paper!"

Of course, nobody actually expects him to succeed. Ellison certainly doesn't—she clearly thinks that Murdoch ruined an American institution. "Coverage of the presidential primaries dominated the front page in a paper that had originally made its name with enlightening features on business and the economy," Ellison sniffs, noting that Josh Prager, a feature reporter who "wrote less than a story a year" on topics that were "never relevant to the news of the day," resigned in 2009, convinced that he and the paper no longer fit well together. "The worship of byline and word counts and all that is 'urgent' has doubtless stifled the boundless creativity of the *Journal* staff. I hope the paper will address this problem," wrote Prager in his farewell e-mail.

But one man's boundless creativity is another man's self-indulgence. The truth is that, in the years before its sale, the *Journal* was often flaccid and ponderous and dull, its staffers so pleased with themselves for being a step behind the news cycle that they didn't even notice they missed the biggest story of their time.

In May 2009, Dean Starkman, my co-worker at the *Columbia Journalism Review* (and a former *Journal* reporter), published an article assessing the financial press's performance in the years leading up to the recent financial crisis. Starkman read several thousand articles published between 2000 and 2007 to see how active nine major outlets had been in reporting on and warning about subprime lending, deregulation, and other causes of the crisis. He found that those outlets—including the *Wall Street Journal*—had been largely silent for much of that time: "Missing are investigative stories that confront directly powerful institutions about basic business practices while those institutions were still powerful. This is not a detail. This is the watchdog that didn't bark."

With that in mind, it's hard to buy the argument that Murdoch single-handedly crippled a great paper, since Ellison's evidence for greatness rests on its editors' willingness to publish quirky stories about the wastrel who inherited the royalties to the children's book *Goodnight Moon*. I like a good piece of narrative reporting literally more than anyone I know; I loved the *Journal*'s A-heds, and I mourn their passing. But, look, that was journalism produced for and by the nation's elite, divorced from any real awareness of readers and audience outside the East Coast nexus. The world's economy collapsed while the *Wall Street Journal* was doing everything in its power to *not* report the news.

That's not to say that Ellison is wrong about Murdoch—make no mistake, he still comes across as a horrible, horrible person; his *Journal* up to now can hardly be counted as "a fucking great paper." But say what you will about him and his choices, Murdoch is determined to produce journalism for actual people. "You know, reporters are not writers in residence," Murdoch told an assembly of *Journal* editors. "I think we have to have news and analysis and we have to break hard news ... don't run away from it. Go with it. I'd like to pick up the paper and say 'Gosh, I must read that—did that really happen?'"

Barbarism? Perhaps. But you could also call it journalism. WM

Justin Peters is an editor at the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

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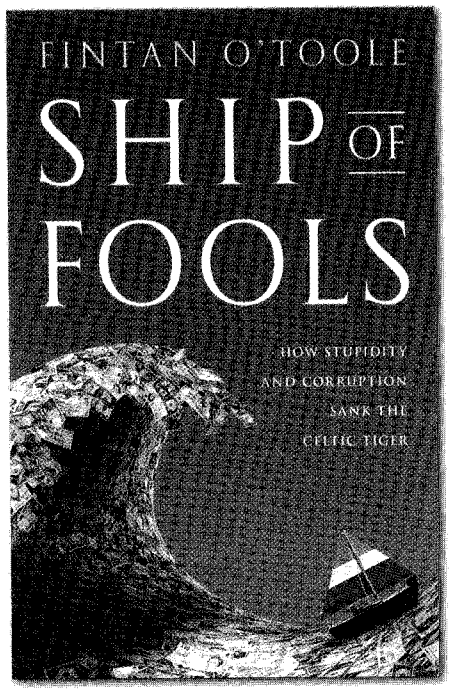
Reading Milton Friedman in Dublin

Ireland's politicians spent the '90s and '00s imitating the United States' devotion to unfettered free markets. Unfortunately for the Irish, they succeeded.

By Henry Farrell



Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger
by Fintan O'Toole
Public Affairs, 240 pp.

When I first came to the United States from Ireland in the early 1990s, Americans thought of my home country as a land of green fields, bibulous peasants, and perhaps the occasional leprechaun. Once, on a bus from Ann Arbor to Detroit, a fellow passenger heard my accent and asked if she could touch me for good luck. But something changed over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, as Ireland started to enjoy remarkable levels of economic growth. Blather about Guinness and the Little People made way for a new story line: the success of the Celtic Tiger economy. Between 1995 and 2007, Irish GDP grew at an average rate of 6 percent every year. Housing prices rose by 270 percent between 1996 and 2006. A country that had long been notorious for its high emigration rates started to import people instead. Gort—a tiny town in Galway—acquired a large population of South American immigrants, while Dublin supported no less than three Polish-language newspapers.

But the boom didn't last. Over the last eighteen months, Ireland has seen a devastating economic collapse. GDP fell by an estimated 7.25 percent in 2009, while unemployment rose to 12.6 percent and is forecast to rise to 14 percent this year. House prices have plummeted 30 percent since their peak, and are likely to fall much farther. The immigrants are going back to Poland and Brazil.

Ireland's economic problems started, like America's, in the real estate market. Just as in the U.S., free-market ideology and comfortable relationships between businessmen and politicians encouraged the creation of a housing bubble. As a recent report by three National University of Ireland economists emphasizes, Ireland's financial institutions did not fall prey to exotic financial instruments, but to lax regulation and bad business judgment. The report is tactfully silent regarding the reasons why Irish regulators made "obviously flawed" judgments, although its mention of the fact that "most large property developers in Ireland have been very closely connected to the ruling political party, Fianna Fáil," offers some clues.

Political commentators may rush in where economists fear to tread. Fintan O'Toole is a longtime columnist for the *Irish Times*, and a relentless critic of Ireland's altogether-too-comfortable relationship between business and politics. He is also a world-class cultural critic. His new book, *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger*, an account of the facts of the Irish collapse, is excellent, crisp, and damning, but its real contribution is in explaining the cultural and political presuppositions that helped cause the crisis.

Both U.S. pundits and Irish politicians believed that Ireland was like a post-Reagan United States—and that this was a good thing. American commentators and politicians saw Ireland as an emerald-garbed Mini-Me, embodying U.S. values of free markets and minimal regulation. There was no shortage of American pundits willing to extol the Celtic Tiger. O'Toole singles out Benjamin Powell of the Cato Institute and Daniel Mitchell of

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the Heritage Foundation. He might equally have pointed to Thomas Friedman, who, in an unfortunately titled *New York Times* op-ed column, "Follow the Leapin' Leprechaun," informed continental European states that they either had to "become Ireland or ... become museums." John McCain made the even more absurd claim in a presidential debate that the U.S. needed to cut business taxes to Irish levels to stop firms from relocating elsewhere. Ireland had become so Americanized that America itself had to run to catch up.

Irish people too swallowed this codswallop. Deputy Prime Minister Mary Harney famously suggested that Ireland was spiritually closer to Boston than Berlin. Dublin audiences gaped at Michael Flatley's dance spectacular *The Celtic Tiger*, which culminated with Cathleen ní Houlihan, William Butler Yeats's embodiment of oppressed Ireland, performing a grotesque striptease to reveal bra and panties emblazoned with the Stars and Stripes.

Dublin audiences gaped at Michael Flatley's dance spectacular The Celtic Tiger, *which culminated with Cathleen ní Houlihan, William Butler Yeats's embodiment of oppressed Ireland, performing a grotesque striptease to reveal bra and panties emblazoned with the Stars and Stripes.*

This rhetoric of free-market empowerment reinforced long-standing problems of the Irish government. State institutions, while mostly noncorrupt, were prone to inaction, especially when active regulation might have discommoded powerful interests. Oversight of the banking sector was particularly problematic. Ireland's Central Bank proved consistently unwilling to exercise any independent role on politically ticklish issues. When the Central Bank discovered that the Ansbacher Bank was breaking the law by running a major tax evasion scam for the benefit of a small group of individuals (which included Charles Haughey, a longtime Irish prime minister noted both for his personal vindictiveness and his lavish lifestyle), it declined to discipline the bank for abusing its license, or indeed to inform the taxation authorities. This minimalist approach to oversight was later to wreak havoc, as the bank turned a deliberate blind eye to the problematic accounting practices of well-connected banks.

Electoral politics were little better. The dominant party, Fianna Fáil, was notorious both for its flexibility on matters of legal ethics and its ties to agribusiness and the construction industry. At the height of the boom, it went into coalition with the Progressive Democrats, who advocated the slashing of taxes, the minimization of regulation, and the liberalization of social mores. The coalition's pro-business agenda allowed Fianna Fáil to look after its clients as they swapped their mohair suits for Mediterranean yachts. But it also allowed the Progressive Democrats to try to remake Ireland along broadly libertarian lines. Neither party exhibited any very great enthusiasm for beefing up the power of regulators to keep pace with the ever-more-aggressive lending practices of the nation's banks. Nor was either party able to control government spending. The Progressive Democrats killed off the "Bertie Bowl," a horrendously expensive proposed sports stadium, but failed significantly to stop the state sector from expanding, even as business and income taxes fell. The fiscal shortfall was made up by transaction taxes on a booming property market.

As the boom (in Prime Minister Bertie Ahern's description) "became more boomier," Ireland became ever more unequal. A well-connected group of elite property developers bought up large tracts of land around Dublin, which they then let trickle onto the market in order to keep demand high. Not only did developers pay off local politicians to ensure that zoning decisions went the right way, but they blocked repeated efforts to introduce national legislation for compulsory purchase schemes. A 1973 report argued that local authorities ought to be able to purchase land compulsorily at current market value plus 25 percent to stop speculators from manipulating the market and making windfall gains. Government after government agreed with this proposal in principle, throughout the 1970s, '80s, '90s, and 2000s—but curiously, implementing legislation was never introduced. In O'Toole's description, Fianna Fáil "would sooner have personally insulted the Pope, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa" than offended the land speculators who helped fund their party. By the early 2000s, not only Fianna Fáil but the state itself needed to keep the property market buoyant. If the party ever stopped, both would face serious holes in their finances.

Both market rhetoric and dense webs of political and commercial connections encouraged banks to lend large amounts of money to a favored group of developers. Anglo Irish Bank—Ireland's third-largest bank and the most spectacular exemplar of the Celtic Tiger's flameout—bet its future on loans to well-connected property developers. O'Toole suggests that "[i]t may be an exaggeration to call Anglo Irish a private bank for Fianna Fáil's more flamboyant friends—but only a small one." Not only did Anglo Irish itself invest heavily in the property market, but it lent more than 100 million euros to its chairman (as well as smaller sums to other directors) to speculate in property on his own account, and then hid the loan on its balance sheet through sleight of hand. The Central Bank–based regulator charged with regulating financial services knew about both the loans and the cover-up but declined to act. To borrow University College Dublin economist Morgan Kelly's term, Anglo Irish was "too connected to fail"—no serious regulatory response was possible.

When Anglo Irish began to get into trouble, a "golden circle" of ten investors borrowed money from the bank itself to invest in its own shares and hence keep the share price from tanking. Seventy-five percent of the loans were backed by the shares themselves. Six members of the golden circle are known; most of them have strong Fianna

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Fáil connections. Anglo Irish executives and board members were also allegedly given loans to buy shares to help "counter negative publicity."

When things started to go bad, they went bad quickly. Government revenues and property prices collapsed. Ordinary citizens were left holding houses that were worth far less than their purchase prices. Large tracts of housing in rural Ireland are empty, and likely to remain so. The banking sector has been recapitalized by the Irish government at enormous cost. Anglo Irish's chairman has, as the Irish press puts it, recently been brought in to help the Irish police with their inquiries under the Theft and Fraud Offences Act. He is also being sued by his bank for 70 million euros in unpaid loans. However, the bank itself was nationalized on the dubious justification that it was "of systemic importance to Ireland." Irish taxpayers are now on the hook for its mismanagement and misdeeds, and for the bad loans of other major banks. Ireland will be struggling with the consequences for at least a generation. "Too connected to fail" is not a sound strategy for long-term economic growth, especially when it is reinforced by an ideological antipathy toward regulation and political accountability.

Ireland's economic fairy tale has had a very unhappy ending. Still, some useful lessons can be drawn from it. As O'Toole suggests, the wreck of the Irish economy can be seen with equal validity as a tragedy of parish pump politics writ large, or of globalized economics writ small. Personal relations between politicians and businessmen were reinforced by an antiregulatory mythology of globalization and free markets. It is the very great virtue of O'Toole's book that it captures both of these facets of Irish politics, and shows how they are related.

Yet is American politics so very different? Irish politics is profoundly shaped by perceptions regarding the difference between those who have influence within the system and those who are relegated to the periphery. As O'Toole describes it,

> *[A system in] which everyone is trying to size up who's in and who's out is more insidious than [one which is obviously corrupt] and in some respects even more corrosive. Because it is fluid and unspoken, it is also unbounded. For those who see themselves as insiders, it generates a sense of being untouchable. And for those who see themselves as outsiders, it creates a sense of fear. They never feel that they quite know what's going on.*

This is as plausible a description of the United States as of Ireland. In the U.S. system, too, the broad imperatives of globalization are marshaled by well-connected and "untouchable" business interests to defeat regulatory oversight, of the financial system and elsewhere. The American version of these interests is less roughly spoken than its Irish equivalents, and wears better suits, but otherwise it is not very different from the forces that brought Ireland to near collapse. If Ireland once seemed like a miniature America, America looks increasingly like an oversized Ireland. A comparison that was once all too self-congratulatory now has disturbing implications. WM

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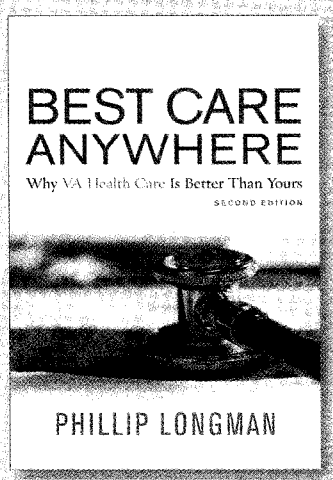
REAL STORIES OF HEALTH CARE IN AMERICA



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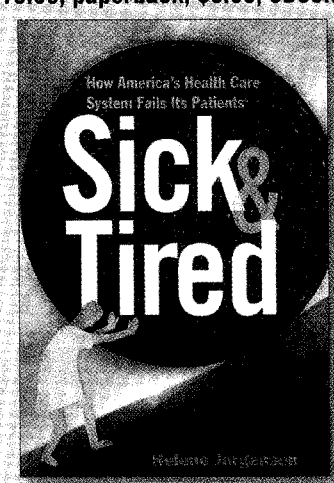

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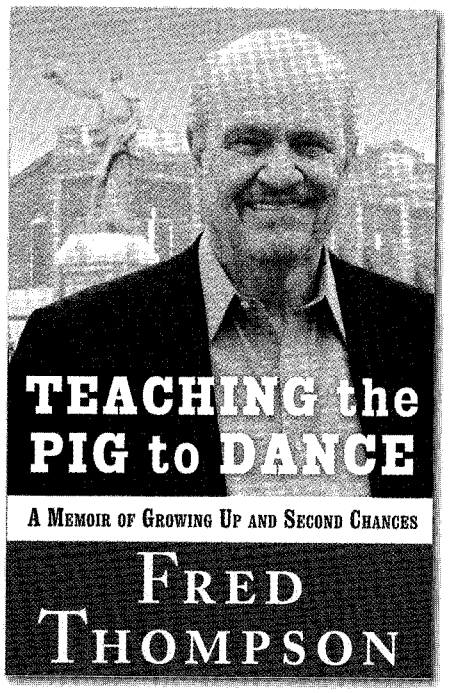

Teaching the Pig to Dance: A Memoir of Growing Up and Second Chances

by Fred Thompson
Crown Forum, 272 pp.

A Trip Down Memory Lane

Fred Thompson's leisurely stroll through his not terribly interesting early years.

By Jamie Malanowski

One can imagine a moment when spending a few hours with Fred Thompson, former senator, TV star, and author of *Teaching the Pig to Dance: A Memoir of Growing Up and Second Chances*, would be not merely a pleasant diversion but perhaps the highlight of the day. Imagine yourself incarcerated for three hours in the cabin of airplane as a snowstorm peters out over the runway and the ground crew puzzles its way through the deicing process. At such a moment, the prospect of Thompson, jowly as a coon dog, comfy as a hush puppy, holding forth in his bourbon-and-branch-water baritone about the high old times he had growing up in Lawrenceburg might be a relaxing tonic indeed. But the hours after you shell out $25 for the privilege of reading the same stories in this memoir aren't nearly as satisfying.

The biggest problem with *Teaching a Pig to Dance* is Thompson's misplaced confidence that the book of his devising that the world is hungry to read is the one that deals with his upbringing. Of course, one might have thought the same about a young author named Barack Obama, and it turned out all right for him, although simply on the basic of travelogy, the Africa-Hawaii-Indonesia-Kansas-Chicago itinerary of *Dreams from My Father* is a tad more alluring than Thompson's progress from Lawrenceburg to Nashville to Lawrenceburg to Memphis to Nashville to Lawrenceburg.

Fred Thompson, of course, has led a life that has seen more than its share of drama and glamour. He was the minority counsel on the Senate committee that investigated Watergate, which would certainly seem to offer a privileged view of Sam Ervin, Richard Nixon, and one of the great constitutional crises in America's history. Certainly, it would be fascinating to hear Thompson's account of his phone call to the White House counsel's office in which he informed them that the committee knew of Nixon's secret taping system. It would also have been interesting to hear what Thompson thought when he later listened to the tapes and heard Nixon and Alexander Haig talking about him, and heard Nixon say, "Oh shit, he's dumb as hell." Later, as a private attorney, Thompson spearheaded a lawsuit that brought down a Democratic governor on corruption charges, then played himself in the movie version of that story, thus launching an acting career in which he's worked with Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, Martin Scorsese, Tom Cruise, Roseanne Barr, and the stars of *Sex and the City*. These are brilliant and temperamental people who may have helped him reach some conclusions about the nature of creativity, and the power of the entertainment industry, and the allure of America's great dream factory. And though he teases us with a mild crack about his *Hunt for Red October* costar Alec Baldwin's liberal politics, he declines to offer his inside account of how Hollywood treats a political conservative.

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(It's notable that in his long career, Thompson has portrayed a host of middle- and upper-level-management government workers—district attorney, FBI agent, CIA director, White House chief of staff, admiral and other military officers, one fictional president and two real ones, Grant and Jackson; in a sense, Thompson, philosophically a small-government conservative, has seldom been off a government payroll.)

He then went on to serve eight years in the Senate, where he debated and voted on everything from the impeachment of Bill Clinton to the wars of George W. Bush, and then capped off his political career with a memorably pathetic campaign for the presidency.

Thompson has had what a lot of liberal arts majors would call a fantasy career. Yet very little of it seeps its way into this book. "As I got into the process," Thompson explains,

> *I discovered that what I was writing about was what happened before I left Lawrenceburg, not after I left. The thought of those times didn't necessarily make me nostalgic, but they did make me feel good. I was revisiting and laughing with some of the most interesting characters and funniest people you'd ever hope to meet ... So I decided to write what I wanted to write about.*

And perhaps we are the richer for it. It's true; maybe Thompson's story of Pooch, the family dog, and the day Thompson's dad painted Pooch's testicles a bright yellow might be more gripping than anything Thompson might say about the tensions involved when members of a president's party can no longer avoid the conclusion that a criminal conspiracy in the White House has reached the very highest level, and that the president himself may have been a party to said conspiracy. And it is also true that Thompson's recollections of his high school days as a star defensive tackle on the powerful Lawrenceburg team that went all the way to Pulaski and brought home the coveted Butter Bowl might have more appeal to the general reader than any firsthand impressions of presidents he might have picked up or stories he might have to tell from years spent on Hollywood sets and in the halls of Washington power.

I, for one, think I would like to have heard those stories. But you know, I'm not positive. After all, I was one of a great many people who thought Thompson would be a compelling presidential candidate and a formidable force in the 2008 campaign. Instead, candidate Thompson revealed himself to possess a presence that recalled the fire and dynamism of Fritz Mondale. After that campaign, and after this book, one begins to think that while actor Thompson can exhibit gravitas, the inner man may not be all that deep.

For example, forget all of Thompson's post-Lawrenceburg adventures that he discusses so little, and consider his breezy way of contending with the great moral issue of his youth, race.

> *We didn't realize a social transition was going on even though we were living right in the middle of it. I guess that is especially true if you are busy just growing up and think you have your own serious problems to worry about. My generation saw the complete changing of certain basic notions. I went from a time when almost everyone I knew thought that separation of the races was the natural order of things to a time when almost everyone I knew thought exactly the opposite. That's quite a journey. And it's one that thankfully my homefolks and I, along with a lot of other Americans, made together.*

That's it? What was all the fuss about?

To be fair, Thompson said that this is the book he wanted to write, and if he has chosen to spend more time on the broken windows he authored as a rambunctious youngster with apparently little impulse control, or on the DUI cases he defended, than on tumultuous events of what on the outside seems like a dramatic life, that's his prerogative. And who knows? With its homages to family life and small-town virtues, it may be the kind of book that Crown Forum, with its proven prowess in reaching conservative audiences, may turn into a best seller. And one should not be relentlessly cynical. Thompson's evident affection for his family, his gratitude to the teachers who kept pushing him, often against his will, his respect for his father's solid and unswerving devotion, and his manifest enjoyment of a good joke are admirable. But all of that might very easily have been conveyed in the first seventy or eighty pages of a longer and far more interesting and enjoyable memoir of a public man, if only the author had had it in him.

Thompson's firsthand impressions of presidents or the Hollywood stars he worked with might have more appeal to the general reader than his recollections of his high school days as a star defensive tackle who brought home the coveted Butter Bowl.

And that book might have had a lot more in it about pig dancing, accounts of which in this particular volume are unaccountably slim. WM

Jamie Malanowski, former managing editor at *Playboy* magazine, is a New York writer.

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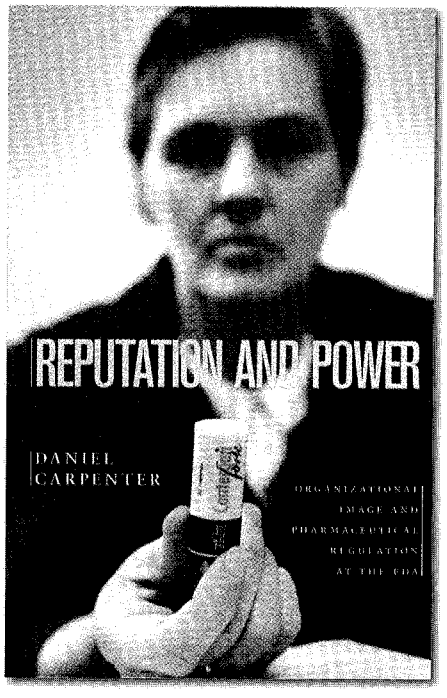
Brains on Drugs



Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA
by Daniel Carpenter
Princeton University Press, 856 pp.

As it considers how to regulate the financial sector, Congress should heed the lessons of the Food and Drug Administration.

By Steven Teles

As this issue goes to press, congressional deliberations on the mammoth financial reform bill have entered the trench-warfare stage, over a seemingly obscure question: where to put the new Consumer Financial Protection Agency (CFPA), which will centralize the writing and (to some degree) enforcement of federal financial regulations on such things as mortgages, savings accounts, and consumer debt. Should it be an independent agency, like the Securities and Exchange Commission, or a subunit of the Treasury Department or the Federal Reserve?

Liberal Democrats, having been burned over the public option in health care, have now promised to die in the ditch to make the CFPA independent, on the theory that institutional autonomy will make the agency more powerful and thus less vulnerable to pressure from the financial sector. Republicans like Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee seem to agree with the liberals' theory and fear that a freestanding agency would tend toward overregulation, which explains why they are so opposed to making the CFPA independent. All sides concur that while the specific powers given to the CFPA are important, in the long run the capacity of the agency to develop operational and strategic independence matters more. What is really at issue in this debate, as in so many others, is the question of bureaucratic autonomy—a principle that liberals rarely give pride of place, but probably should.

Bureaucratic agencies are often created in the wake of a scandal or crisis, to protect the interests of the public. But as Eric Patashnik argues in his recent book, *Reforms at Risk*, once the crisis fades from the public view special interests and their lobbies use the pressure points of the democratic process to claw back their legislative losses. Governmental agencies muscular enough to defend themselves and influence the evolution of public policy can help ensure the vindication of the general interest once the public has moved on to other things. While participatory democracy might be the ideal way to prevent reforms from being reversed, bureaucratic autonomy is a realistic, necessary, and, indeed, worthwhile second best. The success of liberal objectives in areas like financial regulation and health care reform, in short, may depend on learning how to arm agencies with the weapons of their own defense.

Thankfully, we have been graced with a genuine magnum opus to guide us through these questions: Daniel Carpenter's remarkable, exhaustive, and frankly (at more than 850 pages) exhausting historical study, *Reputation and Power: Organizational Image and Pharmaceutical Regulation at the FDA*. It is, without question, the best study of a federal agency since Martha Derthick's *Policymaking for Social Security*, and, like Derthick, Carpenter reminds us that bureaucrats are not mere functionaries and timeservers. They have the capacity, under certain conditions, to be powerful agents of political, economic, and social change.

The questions that Carpenter raises are of vital importance for liberals, since the question of bureaucratic power turns out to be central to the possibility of effective governance. To make sense of Carpenter's argument, let's take a short detour into a long-standing debate among political scientists, one with deep roots in American political culture.

Americans have traditionally shuddered at the danger that bureaucracies pose for democratic self-government, and thus for liberty. Liberals get nightmares thinking about

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J. Edgar Hoover's FBI snooping on civil rights activists or the CIA torturing suspected terrorists, while conservatives fear "jackbooted thugs" from the Environmental Protection Agency or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms invading their property. We are reassured, then, when we discover that agencies are firmly under the control of the people's representatives in Congress and the White House.

Political scientists and economists have largely sympathized with our traditional fear of out-of-control bureaucracy. As academics are wont to do, they have formalized this fear, describing the relationship between elected officials and bureaucrats as akin to that between corporate shareholders and management—between "principals" and their "agents." Principals hire agents because they lack the time or expertise to do the work themselves. In so doing, however, they take the risk that their agent will exploit their limited knowledge and oversight capacity to either "shirk" (fail to work, a la the policemen in doughnut shops) or "subvert" (use the principal's resources for purposes that he has not approved).

Put simply, the main purpose of this school of research has been to explore how it is that the will of politicians—and, by extension, the voters who put them in office—can be faithfully translated into the actions of far-flung government agencies. Political scientists have identified numerous mechanisms by which politicians can impose their will. Congressional oversight and control over appropriations give politicians the ability to question, shame, and punish officials whose agencies get out of line. Presidents who detect bureaucratic freelancing can appoint officials sympathetic to their agenda, promote preferred bureaucrats through the permanent ranks, and, in the extreme case (as with President Harry S. Truman and General Douglas MacArthur), fire those who flout their will.

Frequently, legislators also hard-wire their preferences into the structure of agencies by shaping their institutional form (as in the case of independent agencies and commissions) or by creating "fire alarms" (such as lawsuits) that organized interests can pull when they detect unauthorized bureaucratic activity. These impressive weapons, scholars insist, mean that agencies are likely to follow the intentions of their political masters, even where legislators' fingerprints are not immediately visible.

This way of studying bureaucracy has added immensely to our understanding of one of the most fundamental questions of democratic theory, which is how it is possible for the people in an era of Big Government to actually rule. But despite the attractiveness of this approach, it has a number of serious flaws.

The first has to do with the implicit theory of democracy that undergirds it. James Madison observed in the Federalist Papers, "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself." It is for the purpose of "controlling the governed" that we create government agencies in the first place. We build police forces to prevent criminals from harming our persons and possessions and environmental agencies to keep businesses from despoiling our air, rivers, and open spaces. The principal-agent theory would have us believe that these goals would actually be met if only agencies were closely monitored by Congress and the White House. But this is not, in fact, the case.

Regulation is often characterized by what James Q. Wilson called "entrepreneurial politics"—vigorous, ongoing political activism by those who have to pay the tab (such as factory owners who have to comply with environmental rules), but only sporadic interest from those who get the benefits (including citizens who will enjoy cleaner air). While consumer advocates and other public interest watchdogs (starting with Ralph Nader in the 1970s) have often sought to make agencies more responsive to the public, this approach has found only limited—and not always durable—success. That is because greater responsiveness only increases the opportunities for concentrated interests to exert influence over the agencies that are supposed to regulate them. Perhaps ironically, it may be the case that only those regulatory agencies that are able to escape domination by politicians will be able to effectively pursue the goals that those same elected officials wrote into law back when the public was paying attention. Effectiveness, in short, may demand a significant degree of bureaucratic autonomy, rather than democratic control.

The second major flaw in the principal-agent approach is that it tends to focus almost all of its attention on the levers Congress and the president use to control bureaucracies, but remarkably little on the creativity of bureaucratic leaders. Carpenter's key insight is that bureaucrats themselves have the power not only to shirk or subvert their principals, but in some cases to guide or even dominate them. The canvas on which he explains how this is possible is the history of one of America's most powerful agencies, the Food and Drug Administration.

The FDA is not, one might think, the most gripping of subjects. It certainly does not have the glamour of other bureaucratic agents whose power came to rival or even eclipse their principals, such as Herbert Hoover's FBI, James Webb's NASA, or Curtis LeMay's Air Force.

But what it lacks in sex appeal, the FDA has made up for in raw governmental power. Indeed, the agency has the ultimate gatekeeping authority: it can prevent capitalist enterprises from bringing their products to market and set the terms under which those products can be sold. What's more, despite America's reputation as a business-dominated state-building laggard, the FDA developed this authority earlier than similar agencies in other industrialized countries—for decades, the FDA routinely rejected drugs that other nations made available for sale. For most of its history, it also managed to avoid succumbing to outside pressures and thus was able to chart its own regulatory course.

In short, the FDA in its heyday was a remarkable victory for powerful, scientific, rational governance, planted in what one might have thought was exceptionally rocky soil. How did the FDA get away with it? The answer has a great deal to teach us not only about the sources of bureaucratic authority, but also about how we have built effective governmental power in the United States in the past—and perhaps how we could do so again.

The key concept that Carpenter deploys to explain the FDA's extraordinary accom-

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plishments is reputation. Reputation is an alternative to the economists' focus on the pursuit of material interest. In Carpenter's view, bureaucrats (and others in public life) fundamentally seek the esteem of others. And their reputations improve when they work for organizations with good reputations, just as they are tarred when they work for disreputable agencies. This leads to a virtuous cycle: agencies with strong reputations attract more talented staff, which improves their actual performance. This, in turn, further bolsters their public image. Obviously, the same thing is true in reverse, which is why agencies with tarnished reputations so often have a hard time pulling themselves out of the ditch. Thus there is an incentive for bureaucrats not only to do good work, but also to build agencies with the power and autonomy to control their own agenda.

Few bureaucracies have managed to do this as successfully as the FDA, an agency that owes its reputation and clout, in part, to repeated, tragic reminders of the dangers of an unregulated marketplace. In late 1937, more than a hundred people died after ingesting a toxic potion known as "Dr. Massengill's Elixir Sulfanilamide." The deaths were painted as a "policy tragedy" by the USDA (which technically regulated pharmaceuticals at the time but had little real authority). Arguing that such incidents were the predictable consequence of an effectively unregulated industry, agency officials also used the tragedy to call into question the ability of the private sector (in particular the American Medical Association's voluntary "Seal of Approval" system) to protect Americans from the drug industry. Only a powerful government agency with the authority to keep drugs off the market until they were proven safe—the power of "gatekeeping"—could do the job. Congress responded by passing the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetics Act of 1938, which created the FDA and gave it the power to regulate drugs for safety.

Change agent: Frances Kelsey, the Food and Drug Administration reviewer who rejected the birth-defect-causing drug thalidomide, is honored by President John F. Kennedy, 1962.

The Massengill tragedy, and later ones, seared into the public mind a set of lessons that would prove immensely empowering to the FDA. First and foremost, it provided vivid evidence that drug companies could not be trusted to police themselves, and that the public needed an impartial guardian to protect its health and welfare—which is exactly how the FDA came to be viewed. It was an image the agency consciously cultivated, in part by embracing both the methods and the prestige of science.

Throughout the 1950s, the FDA developed increasingly rigorous scientific standards for testing drugs, and managed to impose them on a frequently recalcitrant industry. By crafting the yardstick by which drugs were measured and by insisting on controlled trials (rather than the subjective impressions of doctors), the FDA shaped what scientists, the drug industry, and Congress took to be scientific reality. What's more, the agency's reputation as an impartial arbiter of drug safety allowed it to reject drug applications from the most powerful firms in the industry without fear of consequence, and each time it did so its fearsome image grew.

Eventually, drug companies became concerned about their own reputation in the eyes of the FDA, since it was becoming clear that the agency took companies' track records into account when evaluating applications for new drugs. To garner the FDA's favor, they hired the types of people (especially clinical pharmacologists) that the FDA preferred and worked with the academic and medical institutions that the agency thought reputable. The FDA's power was so considerable that it was able to make these things happen even when it lacked the statutory authority to do so.

Indeed, the FDA's original legislative mandate gave it a powerful but limited set of tools. Its power came from its gatekeeping authority—no new drug could be sold unless the FDA ruled that it was safe. Consequently, the FDA held almost all the cards when negotiating with drug companies that had applications pending before it, as the agency had the option to either reject applications outright or delay action. But the FDA's power was also limited, since it only had the statutory authority to test drugs for safety, not for effectiveness.

During the 1950s, however, the FDA made a number of incremental decisions that subtly reshaped its scientific standards and gave it the de facto power to regulate drugs for efficacy as well. By 1959, Ralph Smith of the FDA's Bureau of Medicine was openly asserting, "No drug is entirely safe ... If it is an agent which is life-saving or if it is palliative in a serious condition for which there is no effective remedy, some degree of hazard can be tolerated." Reinterpreting safety by weighing risks against benefits

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stretched the FDA's legislative mandate, to say the least. But by the time Smith enunciated the agency's position it was almost universally acknowledged, as Carpenter puts it, that the agency's "decisions were actively and necessarily incorporating 'efficacy' considerations already." The FDA's image gave the agency the capacity to stretch its legal mandate, and to insulate its actions from reversal by Congress or the courts.

The FDA's already venerable reputation was further burnished in 1961, when it refused to approve the sale of the drug thalidomide in the United States, although it had been on the market in Europe for years. It soon came to light that the medication, which was used to treat morning sickness, caused gruesome birth defects—more than 10,000 children in forty-six countries were born with mangled or nonexistent limbs as a result of exposure in utero. While few nonretirees remember the thalidomide tragedy today, the pictures of children horribly deformed from exposure to the drug were burned into the psyche of an entire generation of Americans. Sylvia Plath captured the collective horror in her poem "Thalidomide," which offered a haunting description of victims with "knuckles at shoulder-blades."

Against this backdrop, Frances Kelsey, the FDA reviewer responsible for rejecting thalidomide, became an instant celebrity. In 1962 she was voted one of the ten "Most Admired Women in the World" by Gallup, along with Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson. As the media recounted the painstakingly detailed process she went through in investigating thalidomide, the standard vices of bureaucracy were transformed into virtues. As Carpenter puts it, through Kelsey's story the media "re-interpreted 'bureaucratic nitpicking' and deliberation ... as modern-day, scientific virtues that upheld protection of American families and infants." Kelsey personified, and projected to a popular audience, the image that the FDA wished to have of itself.

Indeed, despite the accolades that were heaped on her, Kelsey's critical decision was not especially heroic—as Carpenter explains, she was not "one woman against the system." What allowed her to reject thalidomide were procedures and scientific standards that were already well developed when she reached the agency in the 1950s. In fact, the decision to hire Kelsey in the first place was a part of a conscious FDA strategy to bring in clinical pharmacologists who sympathized with the agency's scientific culture, and who were skeptical of the more impressionistic approach that was favored by doctors and drug companies at the time.

By dealing a powerful blow to the drug industry's reputation, the scandal gave the FDA's supporters in Congress the power to pass the Kefauver-Harris Amendment, which ratified the agency's existing practice of evaluating efficacy as well as safety, and gave it a legal basis for extending efficacy evaluation to existing as well as new drugs. Over the next decade, scores of drugs were taken off the market, many of them without any explicit FDA action. Just knowing that the FDA had authority to crack down on ineffective products was enough to persuade some manufacturers to pull them from the shelves. During this period, the FDA also formalized the now-familiar three-stage process for testing drugs on humans, which helped prevent research subjects from being exposed to toxic compounds (the seventeen women in the United States who gave birth to deformed infants as a result of taking thalidomide had been participating in clinical trials) and tightened its oversight of drug testing, despite considerable opposition from politically connected organizations like Houston's M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.

The expansion of the FDA's statutory power, in combination with its growing reputation, gave it the tools to fully domesticate the once mighty drug industry. In Carpenter's evaluation,

> *At the level of research and development practices, a broad ranging deference to the Administration and its pharmacological regime set in, as drug companies universally engaged in product development through sequences of randomized, blinded, and controlled clinical trials, as they adopted FDA-initiated and preferred standards and concepts in their manufacturing and marketing, and as they displayed increasingly obsequious behavior toward Administration officials.*

The most powerful firms of the new era were those like Merck, which anticipated the FDA's wishes in areas such as personnel and research design, while those who bucked the agency found it difficult to get their drugs to market. With the industry basically cowed, the FDA's relatively small staff was able to exercise considerable power while keeping its most impressive weapons sheathed. What's more, the industry rarely fought back through Congress or the courts when the FDA expanded its authority, even if it appeared to be stretching the formal bounds of its statutory power.

It may be the case that only those regulatory agencies that are able to escape domination by politicians will be able to effectively pursue the goals that those same elected officials wrote into law back when the public was paying attention.

The FDA's powerful reputation gave it a great deal of insulation when an antiregulatory chill took hold in the 1980s. But in the end, the agency proved vulnerable to attacks from libertarians and advocates of streamlining drug approvals—especially AIDS activists who argued that the agency's painstaking approval process was keeping lifesaving drugs off the market and causing thousands of deaths. These advocates and their allies in government succeeded, at least to some degree, in chipping away at the FDA's image, and were eventually able to establish time limits for approving new drugs, thus stripping away one of the tools (the possibility for delay) that had struck such fear in the hearts of drug companies. During the course of the 1980s and '90s the increasingly aggressive and politi-

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cally active pharmaceutical industry (in coordination with Republican elected officials and conservative think tanks) also brought pressure to bear on the agency in other ways. During the Bush administration, the FDA even found itself overseen by political appointees drawn from historical centers of opposition to the agency, the American Enterprise Institute and the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.

While the formal powers that the FDA established in its glory days still exist—in particular the ability to subject new drugs to rigorous, scientific trials—the pressure to rapidly approve drugs has taken its toll. This pressure has been compounded by increasing drug-industry exploitation of the FDA's Achilles heel—its weak post-approval drug-monitoring system, and its lack of control (other than limits on advertising) over doctors' off-label prescribing. These vulnerabilities were brought into sharp relief in 2004, when it came to light that the FDA knew years before it was pulled from the market that the painkiller Vioxx was potentially dangerous; more than 27,000 people are believed to have died from strokes or heart attacks as a result of taking the drug. The Vioxx scandal badly tarnished the FDA's reputation, and observers began to question whether the agency's approval continued to be the world's gold standard. While the FDA's esprit de corps and power may recover under a Democratic president more in tune with its mission, Carpenter concludes that, in the wake of the Vioxx ordeal, the FDA has irrevocably "lost some of its scientific and consumer protection luster."

Pictures of children horribly deformed from exposure to thalidomide were burned into the psyche of an entire generation of Americans. Sylvia Plath captured the collective horror in her poem "Thalidomide," which offered a haunting description of victims with "knuckles at shoulder-blades."

The story of the FDA as presented by Carpenter holds important lessons for liberals. First and foremost, while Americans' skepticism of government is strong, it is not insurmountable. Many Americans think of "bureaucrats" as either ineffectual or self-interested power grabbers, but few feel that way about employees of the FBI, the military, the Social Security Administration, or the National Institutes of Health. And because Americans view these agencies in a positive light, they and their representatives in Congress have been willing to grant them broad power and authority, and in some cases to allow them to exercise power that they have not been explicitly granted—proof that Americans do not oppose handing power to government when they believe it is in trustworthy hands. Just as important, as a result of their reputation these agencies have been able to attract talent that other agencies cannot.

Carpenter's argument has some important, if highly speculative, implications for our current debate on financial regulation. As many liberals have rightly noted, and indeed Carpenter himself argued in a recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, it may be dangerous to put a consumer financial regulator in a larger—and perhaps more finance-friendly—organization like the Federal Reserve. Yet there are lessons from Carpenter's own book that suggest there may be real advantages as well. The Fed is taken seriously by the financial industry itself, and because of its reputation and more attractive salary schedule it is substantially more able to attract talent than other federal regulatory agencies. If placed inside the Fed, the CFPA would be able to build a strong, clear organizational image (especially if it were given the insulation from the rest of the Fed that Senator Dodd's bill would provide, including near-complete control over its own budget). This would help foster the political will to grant the agency the autonomy it needs to effectively regulate the financial industry. An agency of that sort could induce a significant degree of "anticipatory compliance" just as the FDA once did, or at least command the respect of financial companies.

Second, in building an agency with the kind of power that the FDA had at its height, personnel matters. An agency with the ability to control, at least to some degree, its political destiny and strike fear into the hearts of those it regulates requires not only high-quality people, but also people possessed of a particular regulatory spirit. The FDA encouraged the development of the nascent field of clinical pharmacology and then recruited adherents to the agency. This gave the FDA a built-in coherence, and thus the ability to develop a strong organizational culture. The CFPA would need to do the same thing, perhaps by hiring the best behavioral economists from academia to lead the agency, and sponsoring research by those on the outside. This, again, might be easier to do from within the Fed, with its preexisting reputation and more generous salaries, than it would be in a brand-new agency.

Finally, developing a powerful organizational image would depend in part on a leadership cadre capable of exploiting the damaged reputation of the financial industry, and taking advantage of new leverage points as they present themselves. The background of the financial crisis obviously should give the CFPA a running start on this. But, as the FDA's more recent experience shows, the enemies of any regulatory agency with teeth will always be on the lookout for opportunities to strike at its organizational image. Even if the CFPA is able to reshape the financial industry as the FDA once did with Big Pharma, nothing lasts forever. Organizational image, Carpenter suggests, is power—but power based on something as subjective as reputation is also, perhaps inevitably, ephemeral. WM

Steven Teles is associate professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University, a Bernard Schwartz Fellow at the New America Foundation, and the author of *The Rise of The Conservative Legal Movement*, recently released in paperback.

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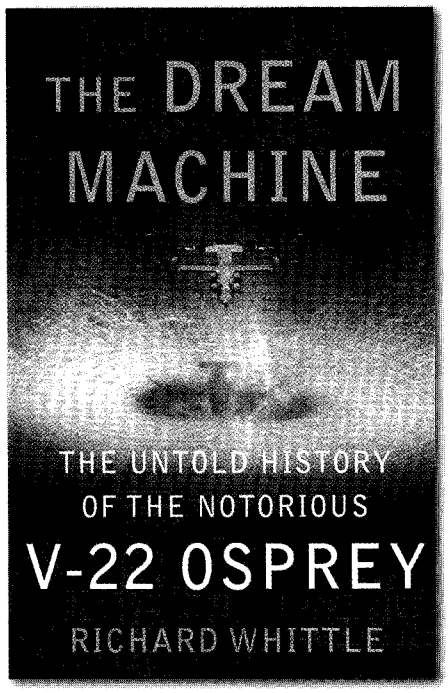
Infrequent Flyer

How the Marines spent thirty years and $30 billion on the V-22 Osprey, an aircraft that's barely fit for combat.

By Mark Thompson



The Dream Machine: The Untold History of the Notorious V-22 Osprey

by Richard Whittle
Simon and Schuster, 394 pp.

April 25, 1980, dawned bleak in Washington. Americans awakened to the news that Operation Eagle Claw, a mission to rescue fifty-three hostages held by Tehran and its newly ascendant mullahs, had failed disastrously, killing eight U.S. troops and seemingly confirming Jimmy Carter's reputation as a bumbling commander in chief. But while Carter took responsibility for the fiasco in the Iranian desert, the mishap was as much technological as it was managerial. The original plan had been to free the hostages by clandestinely ferrying an elite Delta Force team to Tehran with helicopters launched from a remote staging ground in south-central Iran, dubbed Desert One. But the helicopters fell short of the task, and the mission was aborted when too many of them broke down. In their rush to return home, two aircraft collided and exploded in a fireball that killed eight of the ten servicemen on board. When news of the tragedy broke, I was a Washington correspondent for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, and I managed to track down Texas Senator John Tower, a senior Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, in his hideaway office in the Capitol's rotunda. "Never again!" a not-altogether-sober Tower pledged.

There was considerable fallout from Desert One: Cyrus Vance resigned as secretary of state, and Congress created the U.S. Special Operations Command, over the Pentagon's opposition, to overcome the interservice rivalries that had contributed to the debacle. Another legacy was an effort to build a new kind of aircraft, one capable of landing and taking off almost anywhere, like a helicopter, but also able to fly long distances without refueling, like an airplane—a craft eventually called the V-22 Osprey. With its tilting rotors and engines, the V-22 would combine the best of both types of flight; most importantly, its ability to make lightning strikes deep inside enemy territory would ensure there would never be another Desert One.

In his new book, *The Dream Machine*, Richard Whittle, former Pentagon correspondent for the *Dallas Morning News*, tells the long, costly, and bloody tale of this hybrid bird, which has taken thirty years—as well as thirty lives and $30 billion, so far—to go from blueprints to battlefield. Whittle takes the reader from the aircraft's birthplace in Fort Worth to its first combat deployment in Iraq in 2007, and puts us grippingly in the cockpits of the four V-22s that crashed during its development. It's a great yarn for those in love with military gee-whiz technology and aviation in general. But it's not such a happy read for taxpayers concerned with getting the biggest bang for the buck or ensuring that the nation is buying the right weapons for future wars. In fact, Whittle's interest in the V-22 succumbs to the same trap that the Pentagon's did, getting so caught up in the aeronautical wizardry that he never addresses the question that once led Dick Cheney to try to kill the program: Is it worth what it costs?

As Whittle makes clear, the V-22 technology is a wonder, and a testament to the nation's engineering prowess. But just because something can be built doesn't mean it should be. After all, the military has never lacked for zany ideas—nuclear-armed cannon, anyone?—that serve little actual purpose, let alone ones that would justify their exorbitant cost. The type of long-range helicopter missions that were the V-22's raison d'être haven't happened since Desert One. Much more common in actual combat are shorter hops, where the edge conferred by the V-22's speed evaporates (think of flying the late Concorde as a New York–D.C. shuttle). The V-22's theoretical speed and distance advantages have also proven modest, because

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of both the slower helicopter gunships needed to protect it and the slower heavy-duty cargo helicopters required to cart along the supplies the V-22's troops would need for any sustained mission. Some observers suggest it would have made more sense for the Marines to save the V-22 for those few missions needing its speed and range, and buy cheaper conventional helicopters for everything else, but the Marines refused.

And the V-22, for all its technical advances, also came with an array of vexing design flaws. The craft's military utility was compromised by its wide rotor spread, which kept it from landing in tight spots accessible to the choppers it replaced. The crew chief and passengers in the back of the V-22 could barely see out of it, which limited its landing options. The downdraft created by its rotors kicked up so much dust and debris that it could blind the pilots. And the engines' exhaust was a blowtorch, giving V-22s a disconcerting tendency to start fires when operating near vegetation, and to buckle the steel decks of the ships meant to be their home base.

There was also the price tag. During his tenure as George H. W. Bush's defense secretary, Dick Cheney was intrigued by the V-22's technology but believed it was unaffordable, and repeatedly tried to kill the program. But lawmakers from the home states of the V-22's key contractors, Bell Helicopter of Texas and Boeing Rotorcraft Systems of Pennsylvania, fought to keep it alive. To that end they enlisted the help of the Marines, and together they subverted Cheney and preserved the V-22.

By 2007, the Marines were ready to take the V-22 into combat. Whittle followed the V-22 on its first deployment to Iraq, but doesn't tell us much about its utility there—perhaps because there wasn't much. Despite being sold as a "medium-lift assault aircraft," in Pentagon jargon, the V-22 was used as little more than a flying bus. It went to war without a forward-firing gun, and the Marines now say they have no intention of flying it into harm's way. Reliability data (which Whittle barely mentions) stink, too: in Iraq, engines expected to last up to 600 hours had to be pulled and replaced after 400, and to date, only two of every three V-22s in the war zones have been able to fly on any given day.

While the recent deployment of ten V-22s to Afghanistan happened too late to be included in Whittle's book, there's little evidence the aircraft have done much better there. In fact, an Air Force V-22 crashed in southern Afghanistan in April, killing three servicemembers and a contractor. The aircraft have reportedly been used to set up "kill boxes" by flying behind Taliban forces and dropping off Marines who surprise the enemy—which makes sense if you're willing to believe that the ground-bound Taliban are capable of outrunning conventional helicopters (the UH-60 Black Hawk flies 150 mph) but not the V-22, which can fly 50 percent faster. In the recent offensive to take Marja in Helmand Province, the U.S. military largely enveloped the town with troops flown in aboard trusty Marine CH-53s and Army CH-47s and UH-60s—conventional helicopters all.

And none of this has come cheap. At $120 million a copy, the V-22 costs more than twice its original estimate. And it's enormously expensive to operate, although you won't learn that from the book—a strange omission from a volume claiming to be the "authoritative" history of the V-22. You have to go online and download a recent government report to find out that the cost of flying a single V-22 for one hour is more than $11,000—more than twice its goal, and likely to increase. Nor does Whittle dwell on the V-22 program's distressing undercurrent of inadequate testing, lousy engineering, and standards scrapped when they couldn't be met—or the wisdom of putting fifteen Marines in the back of a V-22 that crashed in 2000, killing all on board, when fifteen sandbags would have sufficed.

Whittle tells much of the V-22 story through the eyes of Dick Spivey, an engaging Bell Helicopter marketer. It seems a pilot or an engineer would have made a better vehicle. But upon reflection, Spivey works. He's Willy Loman calling on the Pentagon, "way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine."

It's a tough sell, because the V-22's dismal record hasn't been lost on would-be buyers. The Army initially wanted 231 V-22s, but rescinded the order in 1988. (In one of the book's more telling passages, an Army officer recalls the complex work that went into coming up with that 231 figure, which sounds so fastidious: "I plucked it out of the air," he told Whittle, because it sounded more "analytical" than a round number. Remember that the next time you hear a general extol the wisdom of the Pentagon's current plan to spend more than $300 billion on exactly 2,443 F-35 fighters.) The Pentagon's Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, hunting for a new rescue aircraft, found the V-22 unsuited for that demanding mission last year. It rated the aircraft last among several helicopters when it came to carrying out rescues above 2,000 feet—and Afghanistan's average elevation is ... 2,000 feet. The Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, its premier special-forces outfit, recently rejected the V-22, citing its poor hovering performance. International sales have been slack, too; for the past two decades various other nations have considered the V-22, but after kicking its tires have walked away without buying. Israel has opted for conventional choppers instead. The Japanese were intrigued by the concept and began building a tilt-wing in Texas, after luring several Bell executives to the project, but abandoned it after several years of development. Bell's plan to build a smaller version of the V-22 for the commercial market is languishing as well.

Meanwhile, the Marines' decision to stick with the Osprey has carried a huge opportunity cost. Because the craft sucks up a sizeable share of the Pentagon's budget for rotary-wing craft, other more useful helicopters have gone unbought. That chopper shortage has hurt, especially in Afghanistan. Until recently, there weren't enough U.S. helicopters in that country to ferry critically wounded troops to medical care in time to save their lives. "We had not had a double amputee survive those wounds in Afghanistan until this kind of additional air power came along," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said last fall of the recent (non-V-22) chopper reinforcements. "Now they are being saved."

We could have saved a lot of money—and lives—if smarter leadership had demanded the Marines not bet the house on questionable technology. Unfortunately, they did. Here's hoping that in the future, the V-22's costs will be paid only in U.S. taxpayer dollars, and not in the blood of U.S. troops. The late Senator Tower said it best: "Never again." WM

Mark Thompson, who writes about national security for *Time* magazine, has been covering the V-22 program for thirty years.

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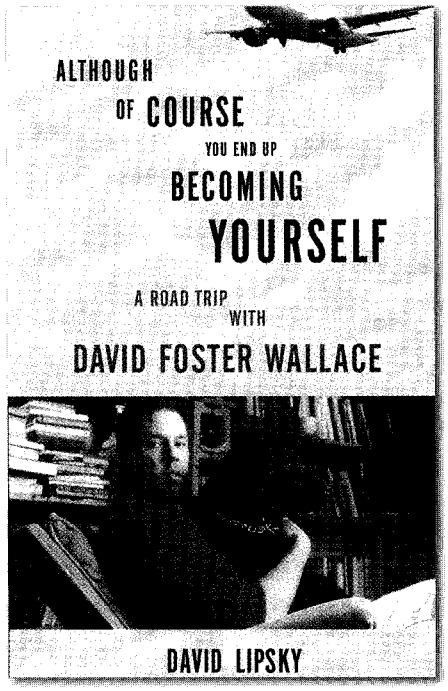
Infinite Regret

An account of five days on the road with David Foster Wallace offers a coda to the writer's sadly truncated career.

By Michael O'Donnell



Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace

by David Lipsky
Broadway, 352 pp.

One struggles to find a concise, representative anecdote about the late David Foster Wallace for an audience of politically minded readers. Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008 at age forty-six, was the most promising and accomplished writer of his generation. An athlete of prolixity, he published a celebrated novel of 1,100 pages called *Infinite Jest*, several meaty volumes of short stories, a monograph or two, and a pair of essay collections filled with footnotes that had their own footnotes. He tended to avoid prescriptions or answers, instead plumbing the complexity of topics like grammar, tennis, state fairs, and television. He was not especially political.

But he did write a brilliant essay about John McCain for *Rolling Stone* in 2000. Clever editors at the magazine booked Wallace a press pass on the Straight Talk Express between the New Hampshire and South Carolina Republican primaries; they titled the resulting article "The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys, and the Shrub." (George W. Bush was the Shrub.) In reclaiming the piece for his 2006 collection, *Consider the Lobster*—and returning to it long passages that a "mensch" at the magazine had removed "with sympathy and good humor" during a "radically ablative editorial process"—Wallace renamed it "Up, Simba." One of the network video cameramen traveling in the bus's press corps had liked to say that phrase "in a fake-deep bwana voice" as he hoisted his $40,000 rig. The goofy new title was essential Wallace: it at once exploited the funniest anecdote in the piece; broadcast his discomfort with authority and prestige by allying him with the scruffy techies; and made a serious intellectual point: was McCain a regal Simba, or was he regal only by a trick of presentation through the camera lens?

This magazine's readers answered that question for themselves long ago—if not during the 2000 primaries then certainly during the 2008 general election. Citizen McCain, with his expedient repositioning, ferocious temper, and shameless cashing-in on character-building experiences, made that easy. But in addition to examining McCain, "Up, Simba" also discussed the cultural forces that both produced him and revealed him as a fraud. The key was advertising—one of Wallace's most animating topics. McCain ran for president in an era of marketing, and his vaunted authenticity itself became a product, with catchphrases like "Telling the truth even when it hurts him politically." Which, of course, helped him politically. McCain sought, Wallace observed, to reap political gain by affecting indifference to political gain. In the face of this confusing show, one could only feel "a very modern and American type of ambivalence, a sort of interior war between your deep need to believe and your deep belief that the need to believe is bullshit, that there's nothing left anywhere but sales and salesmen."

Wallace's suicide created a lacuna: the guy who wrote in the biggest, boldest type had suddenly silenced himself. His death prompted a publishing drive that is at once soothing and a little unseemly: Wallace's speeches, stories, and unfinished novels keep popping up smartly packaged in bookstores and in the pages of the *New Yorker*. This is better and worse than watching home movies of a lost loved one. Better because for most of us, words are all we ever had from Wallace; as long as new ones appear, the illusion lingers that we haven't lost him. Worse because home movies, unlike handsome new volumes, do not pretend to be anything but dated facsimiles. Nor are they for sale.

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The latest addition to this phenomenon is David Lipsky's *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself*, which the publisher describes as a biography of Wallace "in five days." Put less artfully, it is the edited and stylized transcript of a road trip Lipsky took with Wallace in 1996, during the end of the *Infinite Jest* book tour. Even though officially Lipsky was the interviewer and Wallace the subject, they became pals, talking about movies, music, craft. Lipsky abashedly admits that he wanted to be liked. His subject was a fun dude, observant, generous, exuberant, hilarious—in short, great company. The reader, hanging out with Wallace vicariously, gets the sense of jogging along with a world-class sprinter. The jogging is very fine.

In his introductory essay, Lipsky, who is a novelist and *Rolling Stone* reporter, cringes at some of the questions he threw out fourteen years ago. Rightly so. They include many 1) requests to respond to this or that obscure quotation; 2) attempts to pin down the details of Wallace's storied (and much exaggerated) addictions; and 3) bromides to the effect of, "How does it *feel* to have *arrived*?" Lipsky edits out most of his own contributions to the dialogue, which I suppose is fair enough, and also includes material that Wallace asked to be kept off the record, which feels decidedly less so. Yet despite its flaws, *Although of Course* is a fascinating document and a gift to Wallace's many fans.

Martin Amis once said that a critic should absent himself as much as possible when discussing a great writer—the goal "is to work your way round to the bits you want to quote." Wallace's writing certainly deserves that treatment, but so too, it turns out, does his extemporaneous speech. Here he is, on the road and off the cuff, on whether *Infinite Jest* is unfilmable:

> *[Probably, u]nless it's like one of these forty-eight-hour Warholian, bring-a-catheter-to-the-theater, experimental things.*

On fame:

> *[A] lot of this stuff, it's nice, I would like to get laid out of it a couple of times, which has not in fact happened. I didn't get laid on this tour. The thing about fame is interesting, although I would have liked to get laid on the tour and I did not.*

On media attention:

> *This machine that has you out here, asking about my reaction to a phenomenon that consists largely of your being out here. Which of course won't get said in the essay. But, I mean, it's all very strange.*

On breakfast:

> *I'm not even going to start on the idea of eating a hamburger at 7:00 in the morning. The idea is you eat eggs, which are kind of a latent form, as your body itself is awakening.*

On dating as a shy man:

> *Psychotics, say what you want about them, tend to make the first move.*

On the pilot's disturbing announcement about deicing the airplane's wings:

> *Is this one of those deals where we have a sudden intuition, and bolt off the plane on the tarmac?*

On bathroom etiquette:

> *You might not want to go in, I just wreaked a little havoc.*

It has become a commonplace in the literary community to call Wallace a genius. This seems to occur in part because he won a MacArthur "genius" grant, which many writers covet, and in part because he wrote about math, which many writers fear. Mostly, though, the plaudit stuck because Wallace was smart and articulate and had the enviable quality of finding everything interesting. But in truth, his appeal lies more in his honesty than his intellect; it is less that his observations were profound than that others lacked the self-scrutiny or courage to voice them. Throughout the road trip, Wallace spoke with disarming candor about difficult issues: a suicide scare in college, an almost crippling fear of how others perceived him, difficulty finding love. No contemporary writer discussed despair and loneliness with such frankness.

But at the same time, his writing—especially the beloved essays—is tremendously funny, a thorough index of human quirks and charming insecurities (usually his own). Readers everywhere felt a little less lonely knowing that someone shared them. Wallace tapped into what Lipsky nicely calls the "brain voice"—placing on the page in all its absurd detail what it feels like to live, to observe, to experience. In his most famous essay, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," which first appeared in *Harper's* in 1995, Wallace chronicles his time aboard a seven-day Caribbean cruise, beginning with "the shattering, flatulence-of-the-gods sound" of the ship's horn. Staff decline his morbid inquiries about his cabin's superefficient vacuum toilet, which produces "a concussive suction so awesomely powerful that it's both scary and strangely comforting—your waste seems less removed than *hurled* from you." He details the skilled, unobtrusive professionalism and extreme coolness of his Hungarian waiter, Tibor—"the Tibster"—and confesses, "I sort of love him." His elderly tablemates at tea dislike Wallace's tuxedo T-shirt; formal attire is expected. The average young punk would smirk with self-satisfaction at such a gag, but what makes Wallace so loveable is that he is mortified to have given offense. He probably broke out sweating.

And yet in the middle of this riotous stuff are arresting insights. The result of being pampered in every possible way is not the state of pure, transcendent bliss promised in the cruise company's glossy brochure; it is an unscratchable itch for more. Luxury is like candy: not intrinsically bad, but unsuitable sustenance. Its rewards far exceed its demands.

Joy and sadness: this juxtaposition makes Wallace's death at once more devastating and less surprising. How could a writer whose prose breathed in life so fully take his own? And yet, as Lipsky observes, suicide "has an event gravity: Eventually, every memory and impression gets tugged in its direction." Looking back over Wallace's corpus, you notice plenty of heartbreaking observations and nods to the depression that would ultimately claim his life. We owe it to ourselves not to ignore those—Wallace's writing illuminates the painful truth that life can be unbearable. But we owe it to him not to let those passages eclipse the vitality that made his prose, and his readers, come alive. WM

Michael O'Donnell is a lawyer in Chicago whose criticism and legal affairs writing appears in the *Nation*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Bookforum*.

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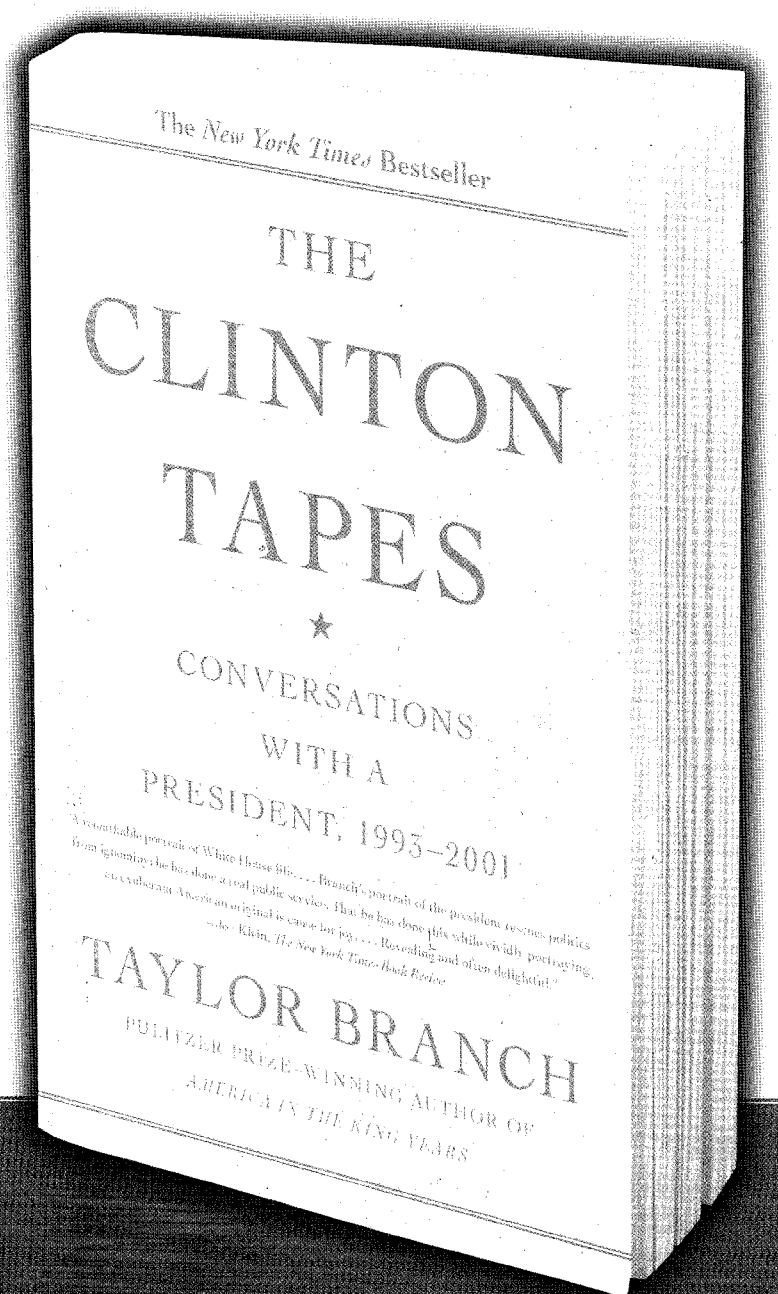

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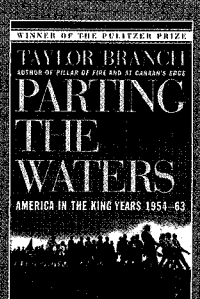

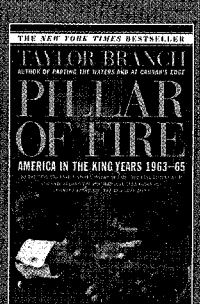

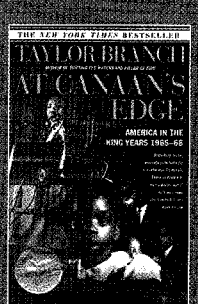

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